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THE NEW YORKER

JUNE 1, 2020

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Rachel Syme talks to the "Queer Eye" star Jonathan Van Ness about quarantine hair and grooming.

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AND MORE

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LEFT: ELI DURST FOR THE NEW YORKER

THE MAIL

JUST THE TICKET

I thoroughly enjoyed Anthony Lane's ode to night trains ("Because the Night," May 11th). I had the pleasure of riding the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express from Istanbul to Paris last summer, and thus feel compelled to contest Lane's clever swipe at the types of passenger many believe to be on board this luxurious locomotive. I had a twin cabin; though expensive, it did not have the thirty-seven-thousand-dollar ticket price of the Cabin Suite. And, happily, my conversations consisted of topics much more interesting than the "same anecdote, from the same retired fund manager, all the way across a continent." Far from being loathsome fat-cat financiers, many passengers had saved for years to take this trip of a lifetime, just as I did. They ran the gamut from two longtime friends from Australia to a retired oncologist and his seriously ill wife; a woman who worked on the 9/11 victim-compensation fund; and a young man and his mother, to whom he'd given the trip for her fiftieth birthday. It was an incredible experience, and I look forward to more sleeping-car trips in the future.
Janet Paist
New York City

Lane's love letter to the night train was enchanting. I've crossed the United States twice and the Canadian border once on Amtrak, seated each time. It's a lot like camping: sleeping in uncomfortable positions, preparing instant noodles by moonlight, and approximating a shower using a water bottle and a sink. Night-train journeys both whet our appetite for adventure and develop our sense of scale. The trip from New York to San Francisco once took more than a year and required you to winch your wagon down the granite slopes of the Sierras. How miraculous is it that, today, you can travel cross-country relatively efficiently, but still stick your head out the window and let the desert wind whip your hair, or watch the moon rise over the snowy Rocky Mountains from the sightseeing car? For the planet's sake, those of us lucky enough to have the means to travel don't just need to find greener substitutes for flying; we need to once again allow cross-continental journeys to be full of grandeur. During these homebound times, Lane's piece offered an important reminder about the power of travel, as well as a wonderful escape back into the wider world.
Sophia Kakarala
Brooklyn, N.Y.

UNTIL THE SHOOTING STOPS

I read Jill Lepore's analysis of the violence at Kent State, Jackson State, and elsewhere with interest and emotion (Books, May 4th). In 1970, for a journalism course at Berkeley, I wrote a paper comparing the media coverage, in regional papers and national magazines, of the incidents at Kent State and Jackson State and in Augusta, Georgia. I found, among other things, that the San Francisco *Examiner* gave more than three times as many column inches to Kent State, where four white students were killed, as it did to Augusta and Jackson State, where, collectively, eight black people were killed. The students at Kent State had their biographies outlined all over the press, but, in a story about the Augusta and Jackson State shootings in *Time's* May 25th issue, the six men killed in Augusta weren't even named. In summary, I wrote that "the whites were mourned, the blacks merely mentioned," and concluded that "in America, it seems, we will not grant equality even to the dead." As Lepore writes, we will go on not only suffering but suffering unequally "until the shooting stops."
Nancy Roberts
Healdsburg, Calif.

•

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In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, New York City museums, galleries, theatres, music venues, and cinemas have closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found online and streaming.

MAY 27 – JUNE 2, 2020

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

Wave Hill, the twenty-eight-acre horticultural gem in the Bronx, is closed temporarily, but its public programs continue. On Sunday mornings through July 26, it hosts Zoom yoga classes taught by Susie Caramanica (pictured), from her home in the Hudson Valley. Registration is required on wavehill.org, where visitors can also download thirty virtual landscapes to use as Zoom backgrounds. Practice lotus pose in an aquatic garden, or perfect tree pose under a canopy of cherry blossoms.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BETH SACCA

DANCE

JoyceStream: Signe Roderik

Most dance offerings online have been performances and classes, but dance films are also becoming newly available. The Joyce offers two half-hour dance documentaries by the Danish filmmaker Signe Roderik, centered on the tradition-filled world of the Royal Danish Ballet. "When I Dance" (June 1-4) is an intimate and moving portrait of two young students, Sylvester and Ella, at the company's affiliated dance school, established in 1771. Serious and devoted, the pair reveal the engrossing nature of life in the theatre. In "The Art of Silence" (May 29-June 1), Roderik explores a technique for which Danish dancers are particularly celebrated: mime. Nineteenth-century ballets are full of mime, but few dancers perform it with the naturalness and the clarity of the Danes. Here the veterans Lis Jeppesen, Poul-Erik Hesselkilde, and Morten Eggert demonstrate just how detailed and expressive the form can be.—*Marina Harss (joyce.org/engage/joycestream)*

Lincoln Center at Home

For "Dance Week," Lincoln Center's online portal will broadcast performances by a cluster of companies, including Ballet Hispánico (May 30), New York City Ballet (May 30 and June 2-3), and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre (June 4). From the "Live from Lincoln Center" archives comes a 1986 N.Y.C.B. performance of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," with a fantastic cast led by Maria Calegari, Ib Andersen, and Jean-Pierre Frohlich (the latter plays the frisky Puck). In this two-act ballet, George Balanchine deftly passes between its three worlds—the love stories of mere mortals, the magic of the fairy kingdom, and the formality of the court—using cinematic effects such as dissolves, freeze-frames, and flashbacks. For much of the ballet, the stage is filled with children, students from the School of American Ballet, in the roles of various winged denizens of the forest. They are the heart of the dance. Ballet Hispánico performs its reimagined "Carmen," by the Spanish choreographer Gustavo Ramírez Sansano, along with "Club Havana"; Ailey's mixed program includes a sinuous, sexy take on Wayne McGregor's club-infused "Chroma."—*M.H. (lincolncenter.org)*

Mark Morris Dance Group

No shelter-in-place rules are going to stop Mark Morris from making dances. On May 28, his company streams four new video works for free. (To view, register on the Web site.) Partially a repurposing of material he was developing before the shutdown, the pieces, all very short, were choreographed and rehearsed via Zoom and shot in the dancers' homes. What might Morris, a master of simplicity, clarity, and wit, do with the dominant frame of this moment, the Zoom grid? The music is Ravel's "La Valse," Satie's "Perpetual Tango," Henry Cowell's "Anger Dance," and "You Are My Sunshine."—*Brian Seibert (markmorrisdancegroup.org)*

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER PHOBIA

Stephen Petronio Company

Count on the still intrepid veteran Stephen Petronio to be one of the first major concert-dance choreographers to brave creating a full work via Zoom. R.S.V.P. on the company's Web site to see the début, on May 29, of "#GimmeShelter," a new ensemble video piece that addresses the anxiety of our common predicament and the longing for connection. The free online program also features a sacrificial dance turned female-empowerment solo from "Full Half Wrong," Petronio's 1993 take on "The Rite of Spring." On May 30, tune in for the première of "_AShadowPrince," a commissioned self-portrait solo by the young, thoughtful, and defiant Johnnie Cruise Mercer.—*B.S. (petron.io)*

ZviDance

One fantasy born of sheltering in place: getting on the road, in the Kerouac sense. As a virtual substitute, on May 30, Joe's Pub is screening a 2019 performance of "On the Road," Zvi Gotheiner's surprisingly effective dance response to Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel. Josh Higgason supplies the evocative road-trip video sequences; you supply your own drinks.—*B.S. (joespub.org)*

THE THEATRE

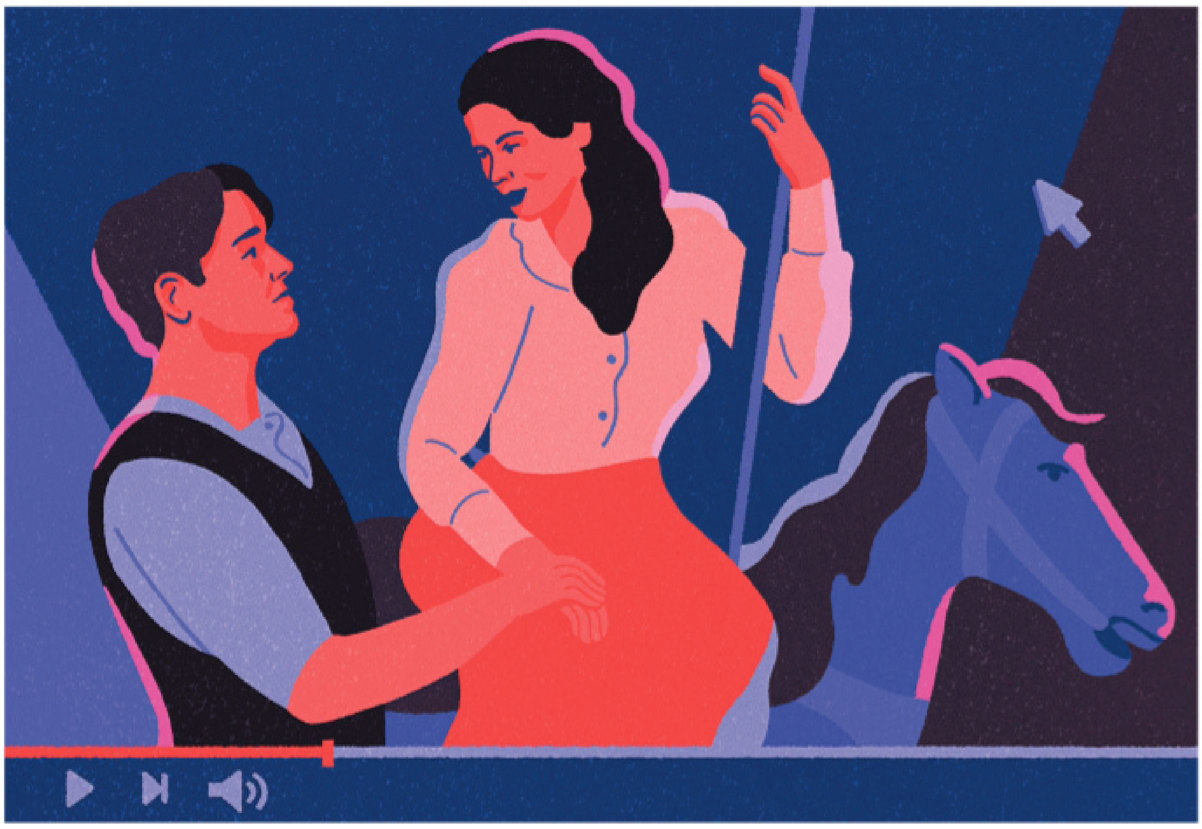
Bleeding Love

You may be forgiven for thinking that the plot of "Bleeding Love" is a little on the nose: the book writer Jason Schafer transposed elements of the Oscar Wilde story "The Nightingale and the Rose" to a future wrecked by climate change, with folks afraid to leave their houses. Yet the romance-minded musical premièred in Denmark in 2015—the post-apocalypse never goes out of style. "Bleeding Love" is now getting wide exposure thanks to an audio production on the Broadway Podcast Network, delivered in three installments of about thirty minutes each. The eclectic score (music by Arthur Lafrentz Bacon, lyrics by Harris Doran), ranging from Broadway to classical and rock, is agreeable enough, but the main draw is the terrific cast. Sarah Stiles ("Tootsie"), with her customary verve, portrays a lovelorn cellist, and Marc Kudisch, Rebecca Naomi Jones, Annie Golden, Taylor Trensch, and Tony Vincent feel so alive that you almost don't miss seeing them.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli*

June Weddings

In the long-running podcast series "Playing on Air," sterling actors sink their teeth into short plays by the country's finest authors. There are no sound effects to speak of, and the intimate directness is very much part of the point. In the latest installment, Barbara Hammond's "June Weddings," Marisa Tomei's Sonja and Michael C. Hall's RJ meet in a bar shortly before noon. His son just got married; she seems to be

BROADWAY STREAMING



Lincoln Center is dark, but, like many arts organizations, it's improvising. At lincolncenter.org, there are live-streamed tutorials in shadow puppetry and ballet (perfect your plié!) and midday concerts for kids. And now **Broadway Fridays** will offer weekly showings from the archives, including the New York Philharmonic's concert version of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Carousel," featuring Kelli O'Hara and Nathan Gunn (June 5); Lincoln Center Theatre's production of the Douglas Carter Beane comedy "The Nance," starring Nathan Lane as a gay burlesque performer in the nineteen-thirties (June 12); and "Act One," James Lapine's charming stage adaptation of the playwright Moss Hart's autobiography, a remembrance of falling in love with the stage and its glamorous denizens (June 19). Watch, and try to smell the greasepaint.—*Michael Schulman*

ART ONLINE

COURTESY BAILEY SCIESZKA

New York's indispensable alternative art space White Columns is a haven from the mainstream. It champions sparky unknowns who are just starting out and superb weirdos who've been overlooked. The intuitive gallerist Jackie Klempay runs Situations, on the Lower East Side, with the same ethos, which makes her the ideal person to curate an online exhibition from the White Columns Artist Registry—a digital trove of still and moving images submitted by hopefuls around the world, from Montana to the Marshall Islands. The eight alluringly devious works—by Dalia Amara, Alexandre Camarao, Faith Holland, Yue Nakayama, Eun-Ha Paek, Guillaume Adjutor Provost, Bailey Scieszka, and Lindsey White—in **"Strange Days: Hit Pause"** (on view at whitecolumns.org) were mostly made before the pandemic, but they feel eerily attuned to the moment. What better symbol of the queasy feeling of quarantined bodies and lives forced onscreen than Holland's GIF of an iPad sprouting tendrils of hair? Scieszka, a Detroit-based phenom, steals the show with her fever-dream video "Fighting History with Lightning" (pictured), a seven-minute monologue by her unhinged alter ego Old Put, whose All-American bloodline includes WrestleMania clowns, Jack Smith's flaming creatures, horror-film demons, Hobby Lobby crafters, and conspiracy theorists.—*Andrea K. Scott*

just . . . hanging out. The pair engage in friendly conversation and get to know each other, though Sonja can be coy—first, she says that she's from Moscow, then from St. Petersburg. (Alfredo Narciso pops up as a bartender.) The play doesn't add up to all that much, despite a curveball toward the end, but Tomei and Hall have an easy rapport that is particularly effective when listening on headphones.—*E. V. (playingonair.org/new-releases)*

ART

The Frick Collection

Why does the art of what we term the Old Masters have so much more soulful heft than that of most moderns and nearly all of our contemporaries? I think the reason is a routine consciousness of mortality. An ineffably sacramental nuance in paintings from the Dutch seventeenth century, which luxuriate in the ordinary existence of ordinary people, evokes the impermanence of human contentment. Never mind the explicitness of that time's memento mori, all the skulls and guttering candles. I am talking about an awareness that's invisible, but palpable, in Rembrandt's nights—his fatalistic self-portrait in the Frick Collection comes to mind. The peculiarly intense insouciance of a Boucher or a Fragonard—the sensuous frolics of France's ancien régime—protests, in favor of life, rather too much. Young folk dallying at court provide the sole but turbulent drama in "The Progress of Love," the museum's marvellous suite of Fragonard paintings. When we are again free to wander museums, the objects won't have altered, but we will have, and the casualties of the coronavirus will accompany us spectrally. Until, inevitably, we begin to forget, we will have been reminded of our oneness throughout the world and across time with all the living and the dead. (Guides to Boucher, Fragonard, and Rembrandt are available on the museum's Web site.)—*Peter Schjeldahl (frick.org)*

"Jordan Casteel: Within Reach"

The first solo museum show by this American painter, who captures both likeness and mise en scène with tender incandescence in her figurative works, was open at the New Museum for only three weeks before New York City shut down. Although there's no substitute for seeing these larger-than-life portraits in person, now you can take a video tour (via the museum's Web site), in which Casteel's generous narration illuminates her themes of human connection and community. In the artist's early nudes of black men, from 2013, her subjects anchor lamplit domestic interiors with relaxed, direct gazes. The men's balance of self-assurance and vulnerability feels like a nuanced corrective to stereotype, as does the flipped gender dynamic of artist (historically male) and muse. Other paintings, such as "Harlem at Night," from 2017, show Casteel to be a consummate colorist, rendering the artificial light from shopwindows to magical effect as it floods sidewalks and illuminates faces. In the portrait "Harold," also from 2017, a man sits in a teal plastic chair in front of the blazing yellow-orange geometry of a laundromat.—*Johanna Fateman (newmuseum.org)*

"Irrigation Veins"

Galerie Lelong and the P.P.O.W. gallery collaborated on this show about the pathbreaking feminist artists Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) and Carolee Schneemann (1939-2019), pairing not only their works but their words—each woman wrote lyrically and insightfully about her art. For Mendieta, the female silhouette was a recurring motif, which she presented as mysterious tracings on the ground, as mounds of dirt, and, occasionally, as fissures; she also documented these temporary interventions in haunting photographs and films. "These obsessive acts of re-asserting my ties with the earth are really a manifestation of my thirst for being," she declared, reflecting a spiritual orientation that was at odds with the interests of her (mostly male) Conceptualist and land-art contemporaries. Schneemann was best known as a performance artist, but she started out as a painter and always revelled in the medium's sensual qualities. She wrote about the female body as an autonomous "visual territory," independent of objectifying traditions. In one famous performance, from the nineteen-seventies, she suspended herself, nude, from a harness to make a drawing; the piece is represented here by a color photograph of an outdoor rehearsal. Her acrobatic figure suggests an exhilarating symbol of freedom—and poetically mirrors Mendieta's silhouettes against a backdrop of scrubby woods and clear sky.—*J.F. (irrigationveins.com)*

2020Solidarity Posters

Like sane people everywhere, artists are practicing social distancing. They're also banding together, and not just on Zoom. More than fifty international artists (and counting) have contributed posters to 2020Solidarity, a project from the Between Bridges foundation, the brainchild of the photographer Wolfgang Tillmans. All proceeds from the unlimited editions—by the likes of Marlene Dumas, Isa Genzken, Wade Guyton, Glenn Ligon, Thomas Struth, Carrie Mae Weems, and Christopher Wool—will support the project rooms, publishers, residencies, cinémathèques, and festivals that help bring contemporary art to light. The posters are available for a donation of fifty dollars, euros, or pounds, depending on the organization's location (details and images are at betweenbridges.net). Beneficiaries of the charming "March on a Honda Dream" by the Ho Chi Minh City-based artist Thao Nguyen Phan, for example, include Visual AIDS and the International Studio &

Curatorial Program, both in New York City, as well as concerns in Berlin, Lausanne, London, and Rome. The prevailing spirit is hope, tinged with romance, as in Nicole Eisenman's wistful closing-time sketch "Never Forget Kissing in Bars."—*Andrea K. Scott (betweenbridges.net)*

MUSIC

"CMS Front Row"

CLASSICAL The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center has long made its trove of archival video accessible through its Web site, and even casual browsing results in some exquisite finds. Now, for those fans who miss adding concerts to their calendars, the organization has launched "CMS Front Row," an eight-week online series, streaming Sundays at 5 P.M., that spotlights its artists with a choice sampling of past performances and a live Q. & A. The violinist Cho-Liang Lin, whose focussed tone draws out the soul-nourishing pleasures of small-scale classical music, is featured on May 31, followed by the pianists Gilbert Kalish (June 7), Gloria Chien (June 21), and Anne-Marie McDermott (July 5); the clarinettist David Shifrin (June 14); and the violinist Arnaud Sussmann (June 28).—*Oussama Zahr (Through July 5.)*

"Day of Musical Action"

CLASSICAL Concerts are among the mass gatherings most obviously precluded by the pandemic, but equally impacted are the galas vital to any nonprofit organization's fiscal health. "Day of Musical Action," a four-hour online concert benefitting the Kaufman Music Center, flips the conventional fund-raising formula on its head: student performers, whose music education the center provides, are raising money to participate in the affair, with added help from superstar guests. The event streams free of charge on the center's Facebook page and, during its second half, features a parade of luminaries performing live, including James Galway, Joshua Bell, Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez, Nikki Renée Daniels and Jeff Kready, Orli Shaham, David Robertson, and Caroline Shaw.—*Steve Smith (June 1 from 4 to 8.)*

Foul Play: "Origins"

JUNGLE The London dance trio Foul Play was a short-lived proposition—begun in 1992, it didn't last beyond 1993. But the group's handful of twelve-inch singles epitomized a zany, sample-driven, psychedelic epoch in British dance music, one that provided a bridge from riff-driven rave anthems to the more experimental (but just as exciting) mid-decade heyday of jungle. On the new compilation "Origins," which collects Foul Play's first three EPs, the music's hurtling momentum remains startling: built on double-time hip-hop breakbeats and irradiated bass lines, the rhythms seethe. But the music is always good-humored, particularly when pitch-shifted samples are made to answer their own call.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

International Contemporary Ensemble

CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL In an online concert hosted by the Library of Congress and Portland Ovations, the International Contemporary Ensemble plays world premières by Suzanne Farrin and Ashley Fure, two composers of exceptional resourcefulness and ingenuity who've worked extensively with the group. Farrin created "Nacht" in collaboration with the ensemble's self-isolating musicians, whose individually recorded parts were subsequently assembled for this event. Fure, with "interior listening protocol 1," provides instructions through which viewers participate in the performance. Farrin's "Polvere et Ombra," a visceral work for solo harp, from 2008, and Messiaen's "Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus," with Farrin playing the cello part on ondes Martenot, complete the program. The event streams on ICE's YouTube channel, and viewers who R.S.V.P. on the ensemble's Web site (iceorg.org) receive a Zoom link to a post-concert reception.—*S.S. (May 28 at 7.)*

Matthew Shipp: "The Piano Equation"

JAZZ Matthew Shipp's new solo recording, "The Piano Equation," may be tinged with a gray-day mood, but its sobering clarity provides something of a musical pick-me-up. With their spiky lyricism, the veteran modernist's keyboard ruminations—clothed in dark tones and avoiding outright sentimentality as if it were an expression of defeat—can bring to mind such brooding elders as Andrew Hill and Cecil Taylor. Yet, after more than three decades of uncompromising work, Shipp's blend of melody and sharp-edged improvisation remains unmistakably his own. The compact pieces, all originals, are bracingly direct—as clear-minded and stirring as Shipp's commitment to his art.—*Steve Futterman*

Woods: "Strange to Explain"

ROCK Although Woods has unleashed albums in a torrent for more than a decade, its musicians live in the shadow of their extracurricular activities. Woodsist, the impressive label manned by the group's singer, Jeremy Earl, has issued records by Woods as well as by a ream of contemporaries. More prominently, the band backed David Berman in last year's instantly mythologized recording project Purple Mountains, slipping beneath the singer with grace and poignancy. Woods' own new record, "Strange to Explain," leaves an even fainter trace, suggesting at times a pen without enough ink or the haziness of a half-remembered dream—the album's recurring motif. The psychedelic guitars and lo-fi recording effects that scorched through Woods' past records are mostly absent, leaving quietude. Such mellow American folk-rock plays uneasily in these staggeringly anxious times. Yet the set's charms—slinking choruses, hushed lead vocals—suit this disarmingly unassuming band.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

Yung Lean: "Starz"

HIP-HOP The Swedish rapper Yung Lean finished his latest album, "Starz," in a makeshift studio atop an abandoned ballet school that he insists was haunted—he joked recently that a few otherworldly voices and sounds slipped into the record's lo-fi trap beats and hazy production. But, even if spirits of the past do lurk in the music, the twenty-three-year-old artist has worked to make peace with former demons. Twinkling songs such as "Acid at 7/11" and the Ariel Pink-assisted "Starz" mark a surprisingly radiant follow-up to "Stranger," a grim compendium from 2017 that Yung Lean released amid a battle with addiction and following a bipolar-disorder diagnosis, an overdose, and the death of his manager. Here, he's found levity that feels hopeful and liberating—and as necessary as an exhale.—*Julyssa Lopez*

MOVIES

The Ghost of Peter Sellers

The veteran director Peter Medak offers an unusual and obsessive twist on personal

HIP-HOP

The Atlanta rapper **Future** intended his latest album, "High Off Life," to be a dopamine blitz during a bleak time—a reminder, as he put it, to "enjoy life, as long as you have it." Of course, as a trap maverick who became a star after successfully pulling mainstream hip-hop into his orbit, his idea of carpe diem looks radically more luxurious than the average person's. The project emerges as a gravelly voiced ode to debauchery on a grand scale, sprinkled with just a bit of vulnerability. It's long, too, but the featured artists add momentum: Future lets Drake go first on "Life Is Good," slows into trap balladry with YoungBoy Never Broke Again on "Trillionaire," and sprints over a fluttery beat with Lil Uzi Vert on "All Bad." If the album starts to drag, Future is too busy living the high life to care.—*Julyssa Lopez*

ILLUSTRATION BY DEREK ABELLA

documentary with this examination, four decades later, of a 1973 movie that wounded his pride and threatened his career: a pirate comedy, "Ghost in the Noonday Sun," starring Peter Sellers. The actor had chosen the director for the complicated shoot, which involved scenes aboard a sailing ship. As told by Medak and the many former associates he interviews, Sellers was both distracted (he didn't bother to read the script) and wildly capricious throughout the shoot (showing up late, demanding extensive rewrites, and even trying to stop production) before ultimately focussing his rage on Medak—yet the money kept flowing. The results were deemed a disaster; the film was shelved and, though Medak's career eventually got back on track, he has carried the wounds—and the documents that sustain his obsession—ever since. Now he has the satisfaction of telling the story himself; it's a revealing view of an industry of enormous personalities—and the indulgences that feed them.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on virtual cinemas.)*

I'm Going Home

Michel Piccoli (who died on May 12, at the age of ninety-four) stars in Manoel de Oliveira's luminous drama, from 2001, as Gilbert, a Paris-based actor whose wife, daughter, and son-in-law die in a car accident, leaving him to raise his young grandson. Gilbert's grief nonetheless propels him into the thick of life, and he starts paying heightened aesthetic attention to his surroundings. Oliveira films Gilbert and the city with puckish delight and graceful precision that capture the actor's refined sensibility—and his poignant awareness that he may be seeing things for the last time. Yet, when Gilbert is offered the plum role of Buck Mulligan in an adaptation of "Ulysses" by an American director (John Malkovich), the performer must decide whether he's ready to trade his new life of seeing for the chance to be seen again. Oliveira, a nonagenarian when he made the film, conveys the hidden rapture of daily life—and the power of images to preserve it. In French and English.—*R.B. (Streaming on Milestone Films.)*

Sweetgrass

A calm and composed documentary, by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, about the last herd of sheep to be driven over the high pastures of the Beartooth Mountains, in Montana. The result is not, however, an exercise in nostalgic regret, or even in the lyrical ease that is promised by the title; just listen to one of the herders ranting, in a string of unsweet oaths, about the physical strains of the job and the ornery behavior of his flock. Yet there is no denying the sweep and grandeur of the landscapes that he and his fellows traverse, and the camera often pauses patiently to absorb them; indeed, the whole movie is in no hurry, lingering over the rhythm of the shearing or waiting for the sheep to swarm endlessly down the main street of a local town. Though the tale of these wry, hard-bitten lives is told with neither music nor a narrating voice, the final effect is not to numb or confound the viewer but, rather, to cast a spell.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 1/18/10.) (Streaming on Amazon and the Criterion Channel.)*

Sword of Trust

This daringly imaginative political fantasy from 2019, directed by Lynn Shelton (who died on May 15), is deeply rooted in daily practicalities. A woman named Cynthia (Jillian Bell) arrives in Birmingham, Alabama, with her partner, Mary (Michaela Watkins), to claim an inheritance from her late grandfather's estate: a Civil War sword of a sort that, unbeknownst to her, is coveted by pro-Confederate truthers. The women team up with the dour, sarcastic owner of a local pawnshop, Mel (Marc Maron), and his loopy assistant, Nathaniel (Jon Bass), to sell it to a radical-right cabal, and the foursome is drawn into a dangerous vortex of hatred. Shelton, who co-wrote the script with Mike O'Brien (the actors improvised the dialogue), stages the often comedic drama as a virtual Western—a series of violent showdowns that depict American towns as lawless outposts awash in guns. The film boldly suggests that, when rightists are armed to the teeth, the left needs weapons as well. Shelton plays Deirdre, Mel's ex; their backstory is the movie's emotional backbone.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, Hulu, and other services.)*

What's Up, Doc?

Peter Bogdanovich's 1972 screwball comedy stars Ryan O'Neal as Howard Bannister, an absent-minded musicologist who travels to San Francisco with his hyper-organized fiancée, Eunice Burns (Madeline Kahn). At their hotel, Howard meets Judy Maxwell (Barbra Streisand), a flyaway force of nature, albeit a very well-educated one, who falls in love with him at first sight and plugs herself instantly into his life, endangering his engagement as well as his career. Bogdanovich pays tribute to Howard Hawks's "Bringing Up Baby" and to the freewheeling catastrophe comedy of silent films, with their elaborate and terrifying stunts—most of which here are set in motion by Judy. She's accident-prone—for others—but comes off unscathed, leaving destruction in her wake; she's the calm eye of her own storm, and her typhonic character gives rise to a series of grand-scale calamities that destabilize Howard's formerly tranquil existence and rearrange matters of work and love. In Bogdanovich's analytical twist on the genre, even joyous liberation leaves a huge mess.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, iTunes, and other services.)*

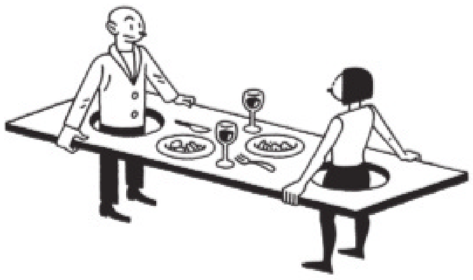
For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town

WHAT TO STREAM

COURTESY ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

Anthology Film Archives is offering highlights from its collection for free on its Vimeo channel, including a selection of short films and features by its founder Jonas Mekas. Two clips of undated outtakes by Lowell Bodger are also featured, "[NYC—Downtown]" and "[W 8th Street Heading West]," providing jolts of public life that are bittersweet to view at this time of social distancing. The former, from the nineteen-sixties, filmed in a mournful black-and-white palette, largely around Astor Place and Washington Square Park, shows the area's majestic architecture and rumpled charm (including long-vanished buildings and shops) and an alluring variety of urban design by way of street signs, traffic lights, and lampposts. The latter work, from around 1970, a single shot filmed in color on a walk through a crowd, displays the distinctive logos of stores and restaurants along with the personal styles of passersby. Today, as many retail businesses are at risk, Bodger's self-conscious embrace of the cityscape's ordinary beauties is both a nostalgic delight and a reminder to recognize—in defiance of habit—familiar sights as historical treasures.—*Richard Brody*

EXTRA CRISPY FAST FOOD FRIES
Broccoli Spears
CHOPPED KALE
BUTTERMILK WAFFLES
Cookie Dough
PEPPERONI
KOREAN RICE CAKES



TABLES FOR TWO

Frozen Foods for the Win

At a moment when the future feels precarious, there is one thing that reliably brings me a sense of stability. Whenever the mood strikes, and with minimal effort, I can enjoy any of the following: steaming, slippery-skinned *xiao long bao*, also known as soup dumplings, from Nan Xiang Xiao Long Bao, a Flushing restaurant that makes some of the best in the city; warm, craggy butter-crunch cookies from the Good Batch, a Brooklyn bakery known for its ice-cream sandwiches; flaky, coiled *burek* (a pastry popular in the Balkans, Turkey, and Israel) stuffed with cheese or ground beef, hand-rolled by Balkan Bites, a two-woman outfit that normally sells them at coffee shops and the Queens Night Market.

All are indefinitely stored in my freezer. As we hang in the balance, awaiting a new normalcy, the freezer hangs with us, blissfully immune to the passage of time. What long sprang to mind when I thought of frozen food was a sad, sloppy Hungry-Man TV dinner or, worse, a shrivelled Lean Cuisine. But ice cream is not the only food that freezes well. In France, a chain of frozen-food grocery stores called Picard has been incredibly popular for years. Trader Joe's has been upgrading the freezer aisle in the U.S. (its frozen *pains au chocolat* are excellent), and the frozen-pizza market has been boosted by the Bushwick restaurant Roberta's line of vacuum-sealed Neapolitan pies. In the past year, I have received gifts of frozen pasta sauce, ferried from a beloved red-sauce joint called Minard's Spaghetti Inn, in Clarksburg, West Virginia, and of frozen smoked-brisket burnt ends mail-ordered from Joe's Kansas City Bar-B-Que.

Some New York restaurants, including Nan Xiang, which sells dumplings in bags of thirty or fifty ($20-$26), have long peddled frozen items. Others, like Balkan Bites, which ships *burek* nationally ($18 for four), are new to the concept and have mastered it with aplomb—but then an open secret of restaurant kitchens is that the freezer is a crucial tool, despite its reputation as an enabler of corners cut. Frozen food is a shortcut, but so is takeout, and most takeout is not actually built to travel. Restaurant-quality frozen food is as fast, if not faster, nearly as effortless, and often more delicious.

The par-cooked frozen pitas ($5 for five) I ordered from Miriam, an Israeli restaurant in Park Slope, puffed beautifully after I followed directions to run them under water and char them over the low flame of a burner. I got a wonderful dinner out of frozen *pão de queijo*, Brazilian-style cheese buns, from Colonia Verde, a pan-Latin restaurant in Clinton Hill, which I baked and used for sliders; they came, as part of a kit ($34), with seasoned ground lamb and a chipotle cream sauce. A frozen Chile Garlic Beef Shank Pot Pie from Petee's Pie Company ($14) required nothing but a daub of egg wash and thirty minutes in the oven.

A frozen-food startup called Daily Harvest, which advertises on the subway, seems to me misguided, dystopically packaging New Agey "harvest bowls" and soups in paper cups to be eaten on the go (although I do like the smoothies). But, last year, Joshua Brau, who has worked at Chipotle and Blue Apron, and Micah Fredman, who spent time in the kitchens of Gramercy Tavern and Eleven Madison Park, started Ipsa Provisions—tagline "fine food frozen"—out of a shared commercial kitchen. Available, as of now, for Brooklyn and Manhattan delivery only, their soups, stews, and casseroles, which each serve two to three people, are the sort your friend who is an exceptional home cook might drop off when you're under the weather. I tried them first when I was on maternity leave, and, even after I had resumed restaurant reviewing, I found myself ordering more: spicy beef-and-kimchi stew ($23) that comes with frozen Korean rice cakes, to be stirred in; Moroccan-style chicken ($23) dotted with prunes, apricots, and Castelvetrano olives, to be served over Israeli couscous. A business plan that once seemed like an alternative to restaurants now looks like a blueprint for them.

—*Hannah Goldfield*

PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA PETTWAY FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

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Help feed NYC's children and families **now**.

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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

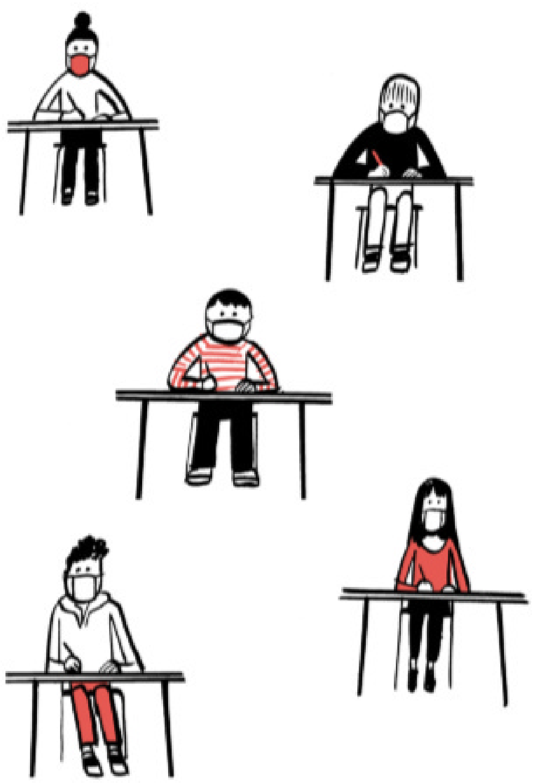
COMMENT

SAFER SCHOOLS

On a time line of the coronavirus crisis, Sunday, March 15th, is listed as the date when New York City's public schools were ordered closed, but that's not quite how things went. Earlier that day, Mayor Bill de Blasio had said that schools should remain open, despite teachers' unions and public-health experts asking him to close them. As a result, little planning had been done, and students and parents went to schools throughout the week to pick up laptops and learning materials left behind the previous Friday. Until at least that Thursday, teachers were required to come in for group training sessions, where some learned of colleagues who were already sick with COVID-19.

As schools across the country think about how they might reopen, that disorderly week in New York City's schools—the nation's largest system, with more than a million students—is worth looking back at, if only as a reminder that openings and closings are not simply a matter of turning a key. Many of the complexities are reflected in guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control, which were released last week. Among other measures, they advise, if "feasible," spacing desks six feet apart, having children eat lunch at their desks, and preventing younger kids from sharing toys. Texas is allowing schools to offer in-person summer school starting June 1st, with classes limited, for now, to eleven people. On Thursday, Tony Thurmond, California's superintendent of public instruction, hosted a virtual meeting with representatives from a thousand of that state's school districts, discussing outdoor instruction, smaller classes, and hybrids of remote and face-to-face learning. California will call for disinfecting facilities more frequently, and mask-wearing, but, as in many other states, local districts will have considerable autonomy. Difficult decisions will have to be made everywhere about sports and extracurricular activities. Last week, Mayor de Blasio said that "plan A" is to have schools fully open "as normal" in September, but that "there's a plan B, a plan C and a plan D. You can do all sorts of things, from alternating days, staggered schedules." Still, he said, remote learning might also be an option.

For many families, it is unthinkable that schools won't open, although there are sharp divisions; a Politico/Morning Consult poll of registered voters last week showed that a plurality think that remote instruction should continue in the fall. The cost of keeping children out of classrooms is high, educationally and socially. Lost instructional time is hard to recapture; some high-school students may drop out. Schools provide meals, social services, and, for many students, a safe haven, and they allow parents to go to work. (Many schools still do; New York City offers grab-and-go breakfast and lunch, and child care for some essential workers.) Remote learning is a pale substitute, and its burdens are unfairly borne. But, without a vaccine, which is not expected to be widely available until next year, many schools may stay closed—or be forced to close abruptly in the face of a second wave of infection.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

The assessment of that danger has become a passionate, and often politicized, part of the school debate. One position, championed by Senator Rand Paul, among others, is that, compared with the situation with adults, there is little to worry about when it comes to children and COVID-19. But some children become very ill and a number die. Some of them have preëxisting conditions, while others with seemingly no risk factors succumb to the little-understood multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children, or MIS-C. And infected children can be contagious. Researchers are trying to determine how the virus impacts different populations, including the young. The key, meanwhile, is to manage the risk, not to deny or underplay it.

Children, of course, are not the only ones in schools; there are about 3.2 million public-school teachers nationwide, and an untold number of aides, administrators, food-service workers, custodians, guards, and school-bus drivers. At a recent Fox News town hall, President Trump said, "If you have a teacher that's sixty-five or seventy years old and has diabetes, that one, I think, they're going to have to sit it out for a little while." Pronouncements like that raise questions of their own: will every at-risk teacher be furloughed or put on disability? Simply marginalizing vulnerable staff members is not a solution. The United Federation of Teachers, which represents most of New York City's teachers, and has been tallying the deaths of scores of its members, has reasonably said that teachers should not return unless steps are taken to keep them safe. The union's proposals include a testing-and-contact-tracing program, a measure that has been effective in other countries.

Almost all the proposals—including another recommendation from the C.D.C., that seats be left empty on school buses—will require money, and so far the funding is not there. Instead, in New York City, the schools chancellor, Richard Carranza, recently spoke of deep budget cuts. "Students are going to feel perhaps bigger class sizes," he said. Similarly, Superintendent Thurmond announced that California, for all its brainstorming, "cannot reopen safely" if planned cuts, amounting to more than fifteen billion dollars, go into effect. Both officials are hoping for federal aid; there has been a severe lack of leadership from the Trump Administration in that regard.

The pandemic, as has often been noted, offers an opportunity to reopen in a better way, with a greater recognition of inequities. There is a risk that the reopening process will only amplify those divisions, with wealthier districts (and private schools) raising money for infrared thermometers and contact tracers, and poorer ones left to scrounge for bandannas and disinfectant wipes. Before the pandemic, public-school teachers spent hundreds of dollars a year of their own money on classroom supplies; they can't just be handed a new, longer shopping list.

In making reopening decisions, politicians and school officials need to listen to all parties involved. That includes teachers but also families; school readiness may mean parents teaching children to wear masks. Above all, perhaps, the process should involve students. Their perspective deserves respect in sorting out what aspects of school culture are most valuable, and how they might safely be sustained. Students, particularly the older ones, are ultimately going to have to be trusted to follow social-distancing mandates on their own. Faced with the threat posed by school shootings, high schoolers have at times shown more of a capacity for leadership than politicians; in this crisis, too, they may surpass the adults around them. That may be an education in itself.

—*Amy Davidson Sorkin*

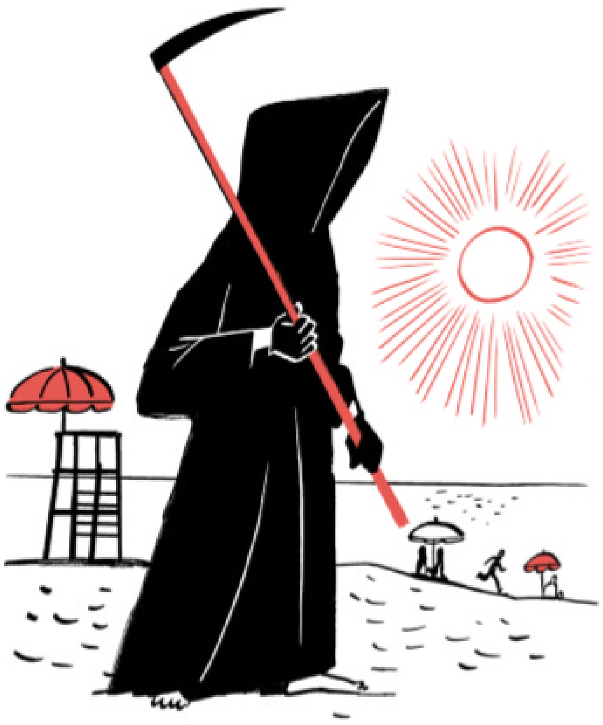
SCARE TACTICS
GRIM

Daniel Uhlfelder, an attorney in Santa Rosa Beach, in Florida's panhandle, was supposed to be on vacation in Spain, with his wife and children, in March. But after the pandemic forced him to cancel his trip he went, on March 5th, to a local Sherwin-Williams store to buy masks. Seeing that the store also sold coveralls for painting in—"They look like hazmat suits," Uhlfelder said—he grabbed one of those as well. "I bought it out of precaution. I didn't know how bad the pandemic would get."

Shortly thereafter, Uhlfelder, who is forty-seven, was distressed to discover that caution wasn't universal. "There were wall-to-wall spring breakers on the beach," he said. "I thought, What am I going to do about it?" His schedule was open. First, he put on the paint suit and tried to scare people off the beach. Then he wore the suit and stood in front of Governor Ron DeSantis's mansion, in Tallahassee, to protest Florida beaches being open; two days later he sought an injunction against DeSantis.

Many state beaches have been closed by counties, but some have begun to reopen this month—too soon, in Uhlfelder's view. He wanted to step up his game as an activist (in recent years, he has tussled with a neighbor, Mike Huckabee, over Huckabee's attempt to privatize beach access), so he bought a Grim Reaper costume from Walmart.com. "But it didn't look like the *real* Grim Reaper," he said. He asked a friend to make him a bespoke Reaper getup in black linen. He added a mask, Ray-Bans, and a plastic scythe. Underneath the cloak, he wears a bathing suit and Old Navy flip-flops. "My wife thought it was too much at first," he said. "She thought it'd be offensive because people are dying." Florida is, after all, known as God's Waiting Room. "But, once she heard my message, she was fine with it."

Angry at DeSantis's refusal to close Florida's beaches statewide, and also at his obfuscatory tactics (when Uhlfelder put in a public-records request for "any and all" documents related to the coronavirus, he got a bill for fifty-one thousand dollars), Uhlfelder has spent three days walking along beaches in the panhandle in his Grim Reaper gear. He takes a low-key approach; instead of



Daniel Uhlfelder

yelling at crowds sprawling on the sand, he engages in thoughtful conversation with anyone who approaches him. To hecklers, he politely says, "See you soon."

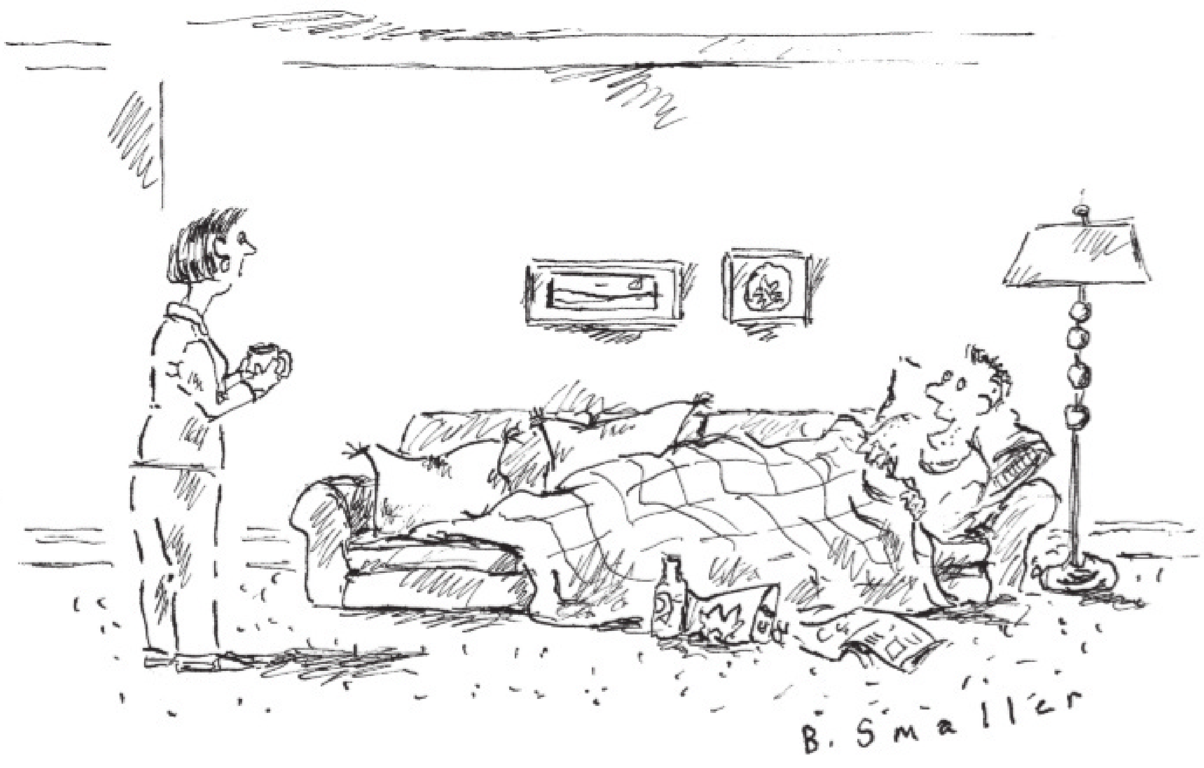
"I'm not a liberal," Uhlfelder said, over the phone from his office. (He used to be a Republican.) "I'm middle of the road; I'm logical." The most challenging part of his crusade is talking to local businesspeople who are worried about how to feed their children with everything closed. Recently, he asked one such proprietor, "What if the government guaranteed your pay for two or three months if you'd stay home?" The man said that sounded great. "But the government isn't doing that," Uhlfelder said. "We're not subsidizing." The county he lives in, Walton, draws about four million visitors a year, but doesn't have the health-care facilities to match. Still, Uhlfelder estimates that fewer than ten per cent of people in the county are wearing masks. "If even one person in New Orleans sees me dressed up and postpones his trip, that's a win," he said.

Uhlfelder's stunt has made him both a publicity magnet and an object of vitriol. "I'm getting mean and nasty calls," he said. "People are e-mailing me, calling my work number, Facebook-messaging me, tweeting at me." Some of the messages are anti-Semitic. "Being Jewish in the South isn't easy," he said. The responses on Twitter range from "Loved you in 'Scream'" and "Welcome to being Black in public" to "looks like Joe Biden's campaign," "The only Corona on that beach has a lime in it," and "Karen has spoken."

Uhlfelder recently announced that his Grim Reaper Tour will take him to Jacksonville, Clearwater, and other beaches across Florida that have reopened, where he will surely be a target. "My grandfather escaped Nazi Germany as a teenager. His whole family was incinerated in gas chambers," he said. "It was always ingrained in my head: 'You can sit around and bitch and whine, but what are you going to do about it?'" He added, "Nobody fights back. That's why we lose."

Does he worry that his shtick might frighten children? "I'm not wearing the costume at night," he pointed out. "And I'm not in Michigan with a gun and a tactical weapon. *Those* people are scary."

—*Henry Alford*



"The great thing about napping is you don't need much in an initial outlay to get started."

RECLAMATION DEPT.
END-TIMES

Hunkering down in New York City—with its once crowded streets, bridges, and offices now relatively empty—a canyon dweller at home could do worse than to read Alan Weisman's "The World Without Us." The book, a best-seller when it was published, in 2007, sought to understand what Earth would look like if everyone vanished. "Say a *Homo sapiens*-specific virus—natural or diabolically nano-engineered—picks us off but leaves everything else intact," he wrote. What then?

Weisman, who is seventy-three years old, has been waiting out the pandemic at his home, in rural western Massachusetts. (The local farmers' stands now operate unmanned, on the honor code.) When the outbreak began, he had been working on a book about hope amid ecological collapse, but his research plans—involving travel to Europe, Asia, and Africa—were put on hold. Instead, he has been fielding questions from people who find "The World Without Us" oddly apt, and going on hikes.

The other day, the weather was crisp, and the sky blue, except for some wispy clouds. Weisman headed for the Rivulet Trail, which runs through one of New England's few remaining stands of old-growth trees. He had put on jeans, a hoodie, and hiking boots—all doused in permethrin to guard against ticks, which have appeared in the area as the climate has warmed. He added a cap over his graying hair, a bandanna around his neck.

One of the most dramatic chapters in "The World Without Us" describes how quickly nature would reclaim New York City if humans were removed. The decay would likely begin from below. Every day, the M.T.A. pumps millions of gallons of water out of the subway system; if the pumps stopped, within half an hour tunnels would begin to flood. Soil under pavement would leach away. Streets would buckle. Within two decades, Lexington Avenue would likely turn into a river. Grand Central might stand for centuries, but skyscrapers would soon topple. Airborne seeds, deposited in bird droppings, would spread vegetation that could tear apart riveted steel high above. Down below, weeds, and then trees, would rip through pavement. "The unstated but absolutely resonant message throughout that book is how important maintenance personnel are to make sure that these things don't fall victim to entropy," Weisman said. He had veered onto a path called Pine Loop.

Since the pandemic began, people have been citing "The World Without Us" online—posting references to it alongside images of flowers pushing through cobblestone, deer in Grand Rapids, a coyote in Chicago. Friends e-mailed Weisman clips of goats taking over a town in Wales, and schools of fish visible in the canals of Venice. A buddy in Colorado had heard reports of elk, moose, and mountain lions in Boulder and Denver; another sent Weisman's wife a photo of wild turkeys in a New Jersey housing project, noting, "Your husband will understand."

Weisman was particularly touched by people who reported that they were hearing more birds. Someone in New Orleans had shared a recording. "It was a barred owl," he said. "They have always been there, always calling, but now you don't have any cars making all that noise." (Across the globe, the drop in traffic is seismically measurable: we are literally moving Earth less.)

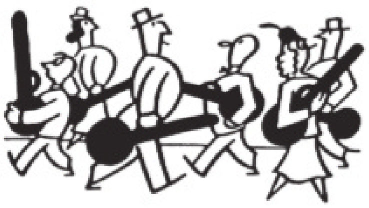
He stopped in a clearing. A pine had fallen, and was decaying amid a bed of sugar-maple and birch leaves. "I don't think nature is avenging itself," he said. "We are having an impact in ways that we can't predict, because there are so many variables in the ecosystem, but until something happens we just keep forging ahead in a bubble of denial." The coronavirus, like deer ticks (now found as far north as the Arctic), may prove to be one of many new invisible threats. He glanced up. "It looks just like the blue sky when I was a kid, and yet there is thirty per cent more carbon dioxide above my head," he said.

Two other hikers appeared. Their faces were uncovered. Weisman raised his bandanna. "The governor of Massachusetts wants us to do that," he said. The passing hikers silently half waved.

On the trail, there was a lookout with a plaque featuring a poem by William Cullen Bryant—"The Yellow Violet"—about valuing small natural wonders over "the ways of pride." Stopping near the plaque, Weisman reflected on his new book project, and on how hard it is to sustain hope when environmental problems cast such a terrifying shadow over the future. "We're going to have to figure out how to make it through what happens next," he said. Below him, in a ravine, a stream snaked among old cherry and white pine. Taking in the glimmer of Earth's untouched past, he said, "Utterly gorgeous."

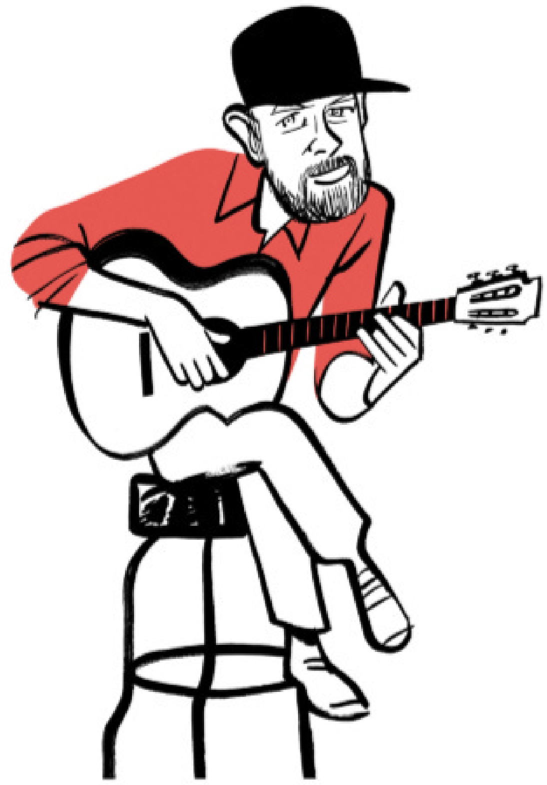
—*Raffi Khatchadourian*

DEPT. OF AVOCATIONS
STRUMMING



"I remember thinking, first instinct, This will affect piano sales," Brian Whiton said the other day, describing the moment, this winter, when he heard about the coronavirus. Whiton, the owner of Brooklyn Fine Guitars and Big Wrench Piano Care, is a piano technician by training. He started stocking guitars in his Carroll Gardens shop only because people kept wandering in asking for them.

As the outbreak reached the city, Whiton began disinfecting his merchandise. "People seemed so relieved when I would wipe a guitar down right in front of them," he said. Initially, he didn't think it was necessary to restrict the number of customers inside the store, crowds being a rarity. But he eventually began having customers e-mail or text him their orders, and he carried guitars out to the sidewalk for them to try. Payment was via Venmo, or Zelle. Whiton even offered to put guitars into Ubers or Lyfts and send them off to their new owners, although no one took him up on it.



Brian Whiton

When, on Friday, March 20th, Governor Andrew Cuomo ordered all "nonessential businesses" to close by Sunday, the news prompted a run on guitars. On a normal weekend, Whiton sells between one and four of the instruments. That weekend, he sold sixteen. "Most of the people who were buying were beginners," he said. Customers would say, "I'm looking for something entry-level to get through this." Carmen Tellez, a twenty-seven-year-old who recently graduated from law school, was one of them. She faced the prospect of being cooped up with her boyfriend in their one-bedroom near Barclays Center. "I thought about whether I could just be content watching YouTube videos all day, which often I am," she said. "Or what kind of crafting skills I have." She'd played a little guitar as a teen-ager. "I was, like, Oh, maybe that's something I could do."

Tellez e-mailed Whiton. "I had my eye on the Yamaha JR1 3/4-size," she wrote, and asked for curbside pickup. "I am healthy, social-distancing, and avoiding public transportation!" When she arrived, he was on the corner, handling a ukulele sale. "I Venmoed him the money, and he brought out the guitar, and he said he had sanitized it," she recalled. Tellez consecrated her new axe by plucking out a little "Smoke on the Water." She has been watching YouTube video tutorials, and during FaceTime calls with her mother she looks over notebooks from the lessons she took as a kid. She's nearly finished learning the beginning of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven." Next up: "Wish You Were Here," by Pink Floyd. Tellez's boyfriend has pronounced the new hobby "less annoying" than he expected.

Another customer was Olivia Brackins, who just turned twenty-one and worked in retail, at a zero-waste store in Williamsburg. Before the pandemic, she said, she met a guy on Hinge who sings in a rock band. "We were on, like, our fifth date, and it all got kind of messed up, because we were all social-distancing, so we just had to hang out in each other's apartments," she said. "But we wrote a song together, in one day. He was playing the guitar, and I was writing lyrics." The song, called "Sanity," opens with the lines "Chase me/I'm ready/To be your allegory."

When the lockdown began, Brackins made her move. "I was, like, we're going into quarantine, and I don't have a musical instrument of my own," she said. She e-mailed Whiton, then made her way over from Bushwick to pick up her guitar. "I'm learning it pretty fresh," she said. "I've been playing it every day. My fingers are getting calluses." Brackins loves movie scores—she's hoping to make a career of them—and is a fan of the Irish singer-songwriter Dermot Kennedy. Also, she's moving in with the guy from Hinge. "His roommates left their apartment in Flatbush," she said. "So might as well."

With his store shut down, Whiton now has more time for his own music. He's been playing his Yamaha CG192C (rosewood back and sides, solid cedar top) for hours at a stretch. "Just standard classical stuff," he said. Villa-Lobos. Albéniz. "Playing music is very therapeutic," he went on. Whiton came to New York from Minneapolis two decades ago, to be a part of the "music scene," and opened his store in 2011. With so much spare time, all of a sudden, he's been taking FaceTime guitar lessons. "Sometimes it's easy to lose sight of how simple it is," he said. "It's funny, because even though it's just picking it up, sometimes it's just the hardest thing to do."

—*Eric Lach*

THE CREATIVE LIFE
SEAT AT THE TABLE

A few days before most of America's workplaces shut down, Mark Levin had the prescient notion that maybe it was time for him and his colleagues to stop sharing plates of charcuterie. Levin is a co-creator of Netflix's animated sitcom "Big Mouth"; the show's writers' room, like many in Hollywood, is generally organized around takeout food. The next day, the "Big Mouth" room had been disbanded, replaced by a Zoom grid.

TV and film productions all around Los Angeles have come to a halt, but cartoons can still get made in quarantine. Early in the pandemic, when the producers of "The Simpsons" moved their writers' room online, the "Big Mouth" staff felt that they were overreacting, akin to Y2K preppers. "We thought, Oh, they have a bunch of old people," one "Big Mouth" producer said. "But we probably don't need to do it."

They did. The "Big Mouth" staff was working on two seasons at once: post-production for Season 4, which, conveniently, had an anxiety theme—"We thought everyone was going to be so anxious about the election," Jennifer Flackett, a co-creator, said—and writing Season 5.

In writers' rooms, staff members regularly trot out humiliating details from their childhoods and their sex lives for inspiration. But looking around the insides of one another's houses was a new level of intimacy. "You get to see everybody's baby or cat or dog," Nick Kroll, an actor and a co-creator, said.

The first challenge was pulling off the table read, during which the actors read the script aloud for the first time. "A table read tells you, Oh, no, that joke doesn't work," Flackett said.

"Comedies need audiences, to hear where the laughs are," Levin added.

The following Tuesday, forty-five writers, showrunners, production staff, Netflix executives, and actors (including Kroll, John Mulaney, Jenny Slate, Jason Mantzoukas, Richard Kind, and Lena Waithe) logged on to Zoom for the table read.

"We are so glad that you are all in this room with us," Levin said from his bedroom. He sat slumped in a polo shirt and an orange ball cap, clasping his hands like a coach at halftime. "We are in the third day of our Zoom writers' room," he said. "It's given us incredible solace and company and distraction and laughter. And that's what we're all going to give to each other today, O.K.?"

Motivational speech complete, he turned to logistics. "If you're reading, it's good to have your camera turned on," he said, seeing some black squares.

"Cool!" Mulaney shouted. He was the only other person who had spoken so far.

Andrew Goldberg, another co-creator, who was seated in front of a bookshelf with no books in it, began, reading: " 'Thanksgiving,' written by Brandon Kyle Goodman."

Cheers rang out. "Yay!" Jenny Slate said. It was a Thanksgiving episode, inspired by the time that Goldberg's father ferried a cooked turkey to a relative's house in the trunk of his car, and Goldberg refused to eat it. Goldberg continued, reading the stage directions: "The door of the oven flies open and through the screen we see Marty's face."

Richard Kind, who plays Marty, the character based on Goldberg's father, leaned into the camera. "C'mon! Are you golden brown yet, you lazy son of a bitch?" he shouted at the cartoon turkey. Kroll laughed.

A few barks interrupted the session, and Lena Waithe ("Sorry!") could be seen scooping up a squirming dog. At one point, Mulaney's feed cut out and Goldberg read his lines for him. Halfway through, the unscripted voice of a toddler screamed "Dad!"

Victor Quinaz, a writer with tortoiseshell glasses and a quarantine beard, was subbing for the absent actor Zach Galifianakis, who was to play a new character. "Happy Thanksgiving, Connie!" he read in a booming voice. "I'm grateful for your ample bosom! Permission to motorboat you?"

Flackett, who was filling in for Maya Rudolph, as Connie, the Hormone Monstress, smiled and nodded, her red curls bouncing. "It's Thanksgiving, baby! Gobble away!"

Claps and cheers broke out again.

"That was actually a blast!" Kind said, when the session was over.

Goldberg deemed the read-through a success. "Maybe not as clear as an in-person read," he said. "But it was actually pretty useful." Kroll liked what he called "the human connection and community" of the event.

"I think we've found it comforting to have each other, and to still be making each other laugh," Goldberg said. "If we lost that, I think that would be really depressing."

Kroll admitted that he has started dreaming in Zoomscapes—"Rotating screens of people interacting with each other," he said. "It's amusing right now, but, long term, I would rather be dreaming of actual interactions, with human contact."

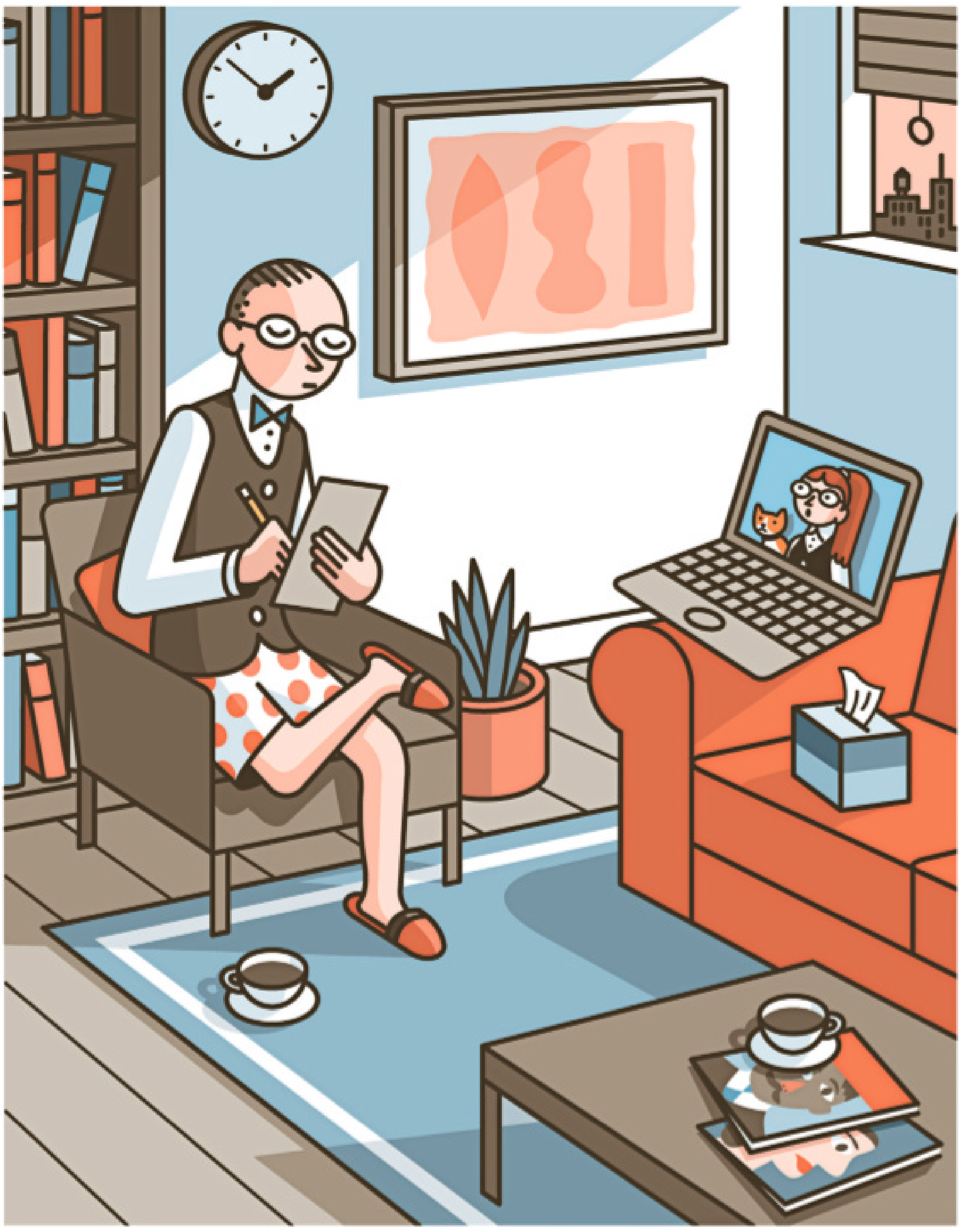
—*Laura Lane*

CORONAVIRUS CHRONICLES

THE EMPTY COUCH

How therapists do their work when their patients are on a screen.

BY ADAM GOPNIK



These days, the advice frequently directed at New Yorkers with deep-seated psychological difficulties is to stop having them. At a moment when every anxiety seems suddenly palpable, and every intimation of doom justified—"Congratulations on the prescience of your neurosis" is the suggested language of one therapist for patients who are obsessive hand-washers—it may seem indulgent to keep pursuing intractable dreams and dreads as though they were central to existence. Nonetheless, in the city's great tradition, New Yorkers continue to seek out their therapists, millennial youngsters as much as neurotic elders. Governor Andrew Cuomo has launched a mental-health hotline, recruiting psychotherapists to provide pro-bono phone sessions for every sort of citizen. Therapy has become democratized: *everybody* needs an ear.

Despite vacant offices from the Upper West Side to Greenpoint, in the old haunts of classic Freudian analysis and in the newer clinics where a cognitive-behavioral approach reigns, the rituals of therapy go on. Several truths emanate from what might be called the empty-couch community. First, the new reality has altered the theatrics of therapy in ways that make both sides of the encounter aware of how much of psychotherapy is theatre to begin with. Second, after the day's anxieties are digested, what remains are the same anxieties as before, newly energized by the crisis. And, finally, there are, in New York, concentric circles of psychic suffering: those at the greatest remove from the crisis are beset by anxiety that is free-floating yet intense; those closer to the epicenter endure immediate economic concerns that, at least for now, may occlude emotional ones; and then, on the actual front lines, where the doctors and nurses and hospital attendants work, a cry-another-day morale emerges, deferring trauma until it becomes impossible to repress. Various kinds of New York heads demand, as they always have, various kinds of shrinking.

The ritual of therapy goes on, but its intimacy—and efficacy—is altered.

"It's utterly different and exactly the same," says Barbra Zuck Locker, a psychologist and psychoanalyst who has been practicing on the Upper West Side for the past three decades. "We've been seeing a move toward remote sessions for years. We have a sense of having adapted to it already. I remember, though it seems so long ago, people talking just a few months ago among themselves: 'Are you still going in?' It was also generational—the younger people are much savvier. People called you up on the way to the gym and said, 'Can we do the session during my workout?'" Locker has a soft, "r"-less New York accent and, in her combination of sweetness, solicitude, and sharpness, evokes Elaine May's legendarily maternal psychoanalyst in the old Nichols and May sketch "Merry Christmas, Doctor."

Like other therapists, the first thing that she mentions is not how differently she now sees her patients but how newly conscious she is of them seeing *her*. "Usually, I'm aware that my patients are largely looking down at my shoes," she explains. "And I've always made it a point not to have on what I call Maureen Stapleton shoes"—the heavy, practical kind. "But now they see only the top of the analyst, and you have to take care of your upper half. It's sort of the Rachel Maddow syndrome." (Just as viewers have speculated about what the television host is wearing from the waist down, clients wonder if their therapists are still half clad in pajamas.)

"I've gotten dressed and undressed more than I ever have," another psychotherapist, Cynthia Chalker, says. "With

ILLUSTRATION BY GREG CLARKE

my colors—I'm dark-skinned with short hair, have to be specific—I'm conscious of what shows up on me. 'Does that green look O.K.?' I check constantly with my wife."

"I spent a day doing my work and I wasn't wearing shoes," the analyst Mark Gerald admits. But, he realized, "if you're a psychoanalyst you know that whatever you are wearing or not wearing is somehow playing a part. We're the people who believe in the power of the invisible parts of the iceberg. Anyway, some of my patients are actually staying on the couch while they're on the phone. It was part of their commitment. So I put back on my shoes. Shoes were a way of honoring the work."

The theatrical side of therapy has always been essential to its efficacy. "As therapists, we try to hold a frame—same time, same meeting place, same ritual—and holding the frame is hard in teletherapy," Ricardo Rieppi, who works with Spanish-speaking clients, says. "There's an embodiment that happens when you're with a person. As therapists, we use our own counter-transference, our watchful, hovering empathy, to do our work. That's difficult online. All the minutiae, my going out, meeting them at the door, their taking a chair or the couch—you don't have that anymore. And I'm seeing the patients in their own home. One patient greeted me in an undershirt."

We feel better because of the therapeutic scene we've just enacted, and as the scene changes so does the work. Gerald, who is also a photographer, is an expert on the significance of the empty offices. Last year, he published a book of photographs documenting analysts' offices across the world. Hovering around his photographs is the possibility that the psychoanalytic imperium, already faltering in New York under the twin pressures of skeptical insurance companies and changing intellectual fashion, may, in the face of the pandemic, be coming to an end—with all those offices soon to be abandoned, like forgotten Egyptian tombs.

"I've been thinking a lot about the empty couch, " Gerald says. "The psychoanalytic office is always a place of loss and impermanence. There are so many common factors, in terms of design. It's a rare office that does not have a couch. A rare office that doesn't have books in it. Rare not to have some kind of framed, non-suggestive art." He points out that most analysts' offices are tributes to Freud's last office in Vienna, which was encyclopedically documented by a photographer just as Freud was forced into exile.

"A friend of his, August Eichhorn, enlisted a young Jewish photographer who owned a little studio, Edmund Engelman, to come to Berggasse 19 and photograph the birthplace of psychoanalysis. It was a risky thing to do—there was a big swastika over the building Freud lived in—and Engelman came in with a camera under his trenchcoat, as Freud and his family were getting ready to leave. Freud saw him, asked what he was doing, and when he explained Freud said, 'Make yourself useful, take the passport pictures of myself, my wife, and my daughter.'" Those photographs of Freud's office, unseen until the nineteen-fifties, the high-water mark of Freudian hegemony in New York therapy, became a template for every office after.

"There's something very lonely and very sad about not being in one's office," Gerald says. "When the coronavirus came, I think people were struggling to find precedents in life: When else was the world like it is now? 9/11 and various parallels came—other times and places, going back to other plagues. But for an analyst one of the things that this brings up, strangely, is August breaks and vacations. Now it's like we're in this long, accidental August, one that no one planned, and with no Labor Day return quite in sight."

In remote therapy sessions, with the loss of familiarly structured therapeutic spaces, a kind of staring contest takes place. Patients may be startled to see a therapist in her home, but it's nothing compared with the surprise therapists sometimes feel at seeing how their patients actually live. Gerald says, "With a person I like very much and know came from a modest background and has difficulty dealing with their own flamboyance of wealth, I found myself distracted. This is a beautiful home, I thought."

Therapists find that the screen changes the texture of intimacy. "Most treatment, after all, involves the careful budgeting of eye contact," Barbra Zuck Locker says. "Patients look away, they look down, and finally focus, at a moment of intensity—a climax." Leonard Groopman, a psychiatrist affiliated with Weill Cornell, puts it bluntly: "You're full frontal now for forty-five minutes. It adds hysteria to an already hysterical situation."

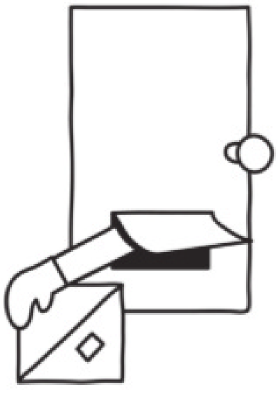
"It's harder when you're sitting face to face," Cynthia Chalker agrees. She has built a psychoanalytic practice that draws largely from New York's precariat: "bartenders and comedians and not-for-profit people"—a whole sub-economy that has had the rug pulled out from under it. "Normally, your patients are looking out the window, at the bad paint job over the desk, all that," Chalker says. "It gives you moments when you can look away. With video, I find I need to sit still and look, and the drama of faces is much more intense. Because I can see their faces closer up, there's an intensity. I can see the tears; I can hear the cracks in the voices. There's something about seeing anxiety *not* in person that's very strong and moving. It's almost like interviewing kidnap victims or hostages. It's also much harder to do a session on video—partly because I hate looking at myself, and I've *gotta* look at that all day. You have a mask of invisibility that you impose on yourself, and suddenly you're seeing yourself seeing your patient, and it's disconcerting, to say the least. 'I look like *that*?' You imagine an aura of empathy, and what you see is more like indifference shading into worry."

This is not an entirely new issue in analysis. Freud, in a paper on the "uncanny," described a moment when he saw himself in a mirror:

> I was sitting alone in the compartment of a sleeping car, when, following a sudden jolt of the train, the door to the adjoining toilet opened and an elderly gentleman in a bathrobe, wearing a bonnet on his head, stepped into my sleeper. Assuming that he had confused the two doors as he was leaving the toilet and had mistakenly entered my compartment, I leapt up to explain the situation, but immediately had to recognize, to my chagrin, that the invader was my own image, reflected in the mirror of the door to the toilet. I still remember that I found the appearance deeply displeasing.

It may be unnerving to patients to know that the uncanniest thing an analyst can experience is himself. "That's how I feel every time the camera in my hand accidentally reverses and I hear a scream and then realize it’s coming from me!” Locker says.

In Queens, the psychotherapist and social worker Kalina Black struggles to bring comfort to the hyper-stressed citizens of Corona and Elmhurst. She was born in Elmhurst Hospital and has lived most of her life in the adjoining neighborhood of Corona, where she now sees patients. “Elmhurst has been linked to communities of color for decades,” she says. “It’s the hospital that values being accessible regardless of people’s citizenship status or ability to pay. And therefore it’s one of the most under-resourced hospitals. There’s no mystery as to why people say even the mental-health professionals are overburdened there.”



Many of her days are spent working with schoolchildren, and recently she’s witnessed a surprising phenomenon: kids diagnosed as having A.D.H.D. and related disorders have often done better in remote learning than they did in the classrooms. “For children managing hyperactivity, focus is the No. 1 thing,” she says. “Their excess energy doesn’t normally allow them to sit still in the classroom, and now they don’t have to.”

The public schools, she points out, remain the key institutions of her neighborhood, and her practice as a psychotherapist is filled with teachers and administrative staff from those schools. “For me, issues of affordability crowd in every day,” she says. “Fortunately, Medicaid does help families.” For the most part, she feels, her patients are less fearful of catching the coronavirus than they are of the pandemic’s disastrous economic consequences. “People from communities of color who have perhaps a first grasp on professional and social success suddenly see themselves slipping backward,” she says. “And that becomes the subject of treatment. Some of the best work I can do is just *naming* it, calling attention to it. My work lies in identifying trauma that people raised in communities of color are often unwilling to name. If you go down beneath anxiety, you find buried abuse—physical, and sometimes sexual and institutional trauma—that has never before surfaced.”

The phenomenon that Black sees in children with A.D.H.D. who’ve blossomed in the crisis appears in other ways in adults. There are, everyone agrees, a small but significant number of patients for whom the crisis confirms an already bleak, and previously marginalized, world view. Ricardo Rieppi says, “There’s actually a paradoxical reaction where some patients initially felt better—their isolation was no longer so stigmatizing. They *like* not having to go out. I have one patient who has an issue with alcohol—every day he goes home and he walks by these restaurants and he has urges to drink and to socialize—but now that’s gone. He would walk home filled with envy and rage about not being included, and now he doesn’t.”

Cynthia Chalker says, “There are people who say to you triumphantly, ‘I was right. And now everybody is in the same boat with me!’ Here’s the thing: my patients for the most part don’t think the government is safe. The idea that the United States is some safe place where they’re going to be protected—blacks and Asians and Latino patients have always had a ‘not safe’ feeling. It’s like when Trump was elected and all our liberal white friends were saying, ‘Oh, my God, I can’t believe it!’ It’s, like, ‘Yeah, now you know.’ ”

Another community stricken by the crisis is the ultra-Orthodox Jews of Brooklyn and of New York’s suburbs, whose generational intermingling—and, perhaps, a certain mistrust of rules imposed by authorities outside the community—appears to have contributed to hot spots of infection. (The pandemic has taken a particularly brutal toll on the senior rabbinical hierarchy.) Monica Carsky, a psychologist and psychoanalyst on the faculty of the Weill Cornell Medical College, who often works with ultra-Orthodox patients, says, “Everyone in that community knows someone who has died, and usually someone important to them.” She goes on, “So the questions I get asked and the anxieties I see are about the impossibility of happiness—about celebrating a holiday like Passover in the midst of so much suffering. It’s especially hard for those cut off from their normal sources of comfort, like shul. I have to become even more supportive than I normally would be, less distanced, though the best thing I can say is that these issues are profound questions for all of humanity all the time.”

Richard Price is a working psychiatrist and a rabbi, who has been counselling the ultra-Orthodox through the crisis. In early April, as Passover approached, he said, “The community structures are so protective that the problem is that when people are sheltered at home they’re not home alone—it’s the anxiety of so many people at home. It’s not the anxiety of loneliness I’m seeing, it’s the anxiety of being too crowded, too many people in too small a space! What I find is that you can create a comforting narrative for people within that community by referencing the anxieties they’re feeling back to the stories they already know. So, for instance, we know that the ten plagues of Passover lasted ten weeks. And, if you think about it—well, this started ten weeks ago. Plague by plague, and with the Israelites facing the last plague by sheltering in place. When you show them the parallel between what’s happening now and a paradigm that’s very powerful for them, it’s helpful.”

The sense of being stuck—whether in the bleakness of solitude or in the restlessness of shared quarantine—recurs among therapists and patients. Sometimes it takes a dark turn. “There are couples who shouldn’t be home together, ” Barbra Zuck Locker says. “Domestic violence is an issue—there’s a tremendous increase in violence when people are at home together. And then there are smaller but real frustrations. One patient wants to talk about her husband’s affair, and he’s home in the next room.”

Among the most desperately shut-in patients in New York are recovering addicts and alcoholics, many of whom live alone in precarious circumstances. Jaime Grodzicki, a psychiatrist who specializes in addiction, says that pandemic conditions have led him to combine a classic “analytic” model with a “coaching” model: he is available to his patients whenever they need him, and aims to talk them through daily crises rather than to guide them through a long-term program of insight. “For a population who self-medicate through anxiety, having the anxiety and the availability of the substance is a dangerous combination," he says, noting that the wine-and-spirits stores of New York remain open, and many deliver. Where Ricardo Rieppi's patient is drawn to alcohol's social aspect and protected by the shuttered bars, others have a solitary habit. "We are putting anxiety *and* temptation directly in their path," Grodzicki says. What heightens the problem, he adds, "is that this population is by nature addictive, and they become addicted to watching headlines on CNN just as they became addicted before to alcohol or opiates. This can only drive you back to the other addictions."

What do you say when the reality that your patients encounter, medically and economically and existentially, can seem as grim as what their anxieties may have wrought in imagination? Words must be found. The solution-oriented practitioners of the various forms of cognitive-behavioral therapy seem to have an advantage over those with more circuitous strategies. C.B.T. focusses on addressing specific problems through specific means—taking on a phobia, say, through neatly gradated steps of "exposure," rather than engaging in the slow probings favored by depth psychology.

Michael Sweeney, the director of the Metropolitan Center for C.B.T., a Manhattan clinic for anxiety disorders, treats patients of all ages. In his view, it's important for therapists "not to be in the reassurance business." If the therapist becomes a weekly source of reassurance, the patient is encumbered, not "empowered." Sweeney's favorite therapeutic devices are simple: he asks patients to think up "headlines" (what is the most important takeaway of the day?) and "letters" (what would a true friend say to you about what's happening?). "There are always multiple headlines available to choose," he says. "There's a COVID-19 crisis affecting multiple people—but aren't the health-care workers heroic? I can move among them. When I pick nothing but COVID headlines, I'm consumed by them. With my younger patients, I have them imagine letters written by two friends, Bill and Jane—I really have to update these names!—one emphasizing all the scary stuff that's out there, the other pointing out all the good stuff that still exists and all the scary stuff that hasn't happened. Which friend would you rather be spending time with?" His older patients, he admits, have often already married the bad friend.

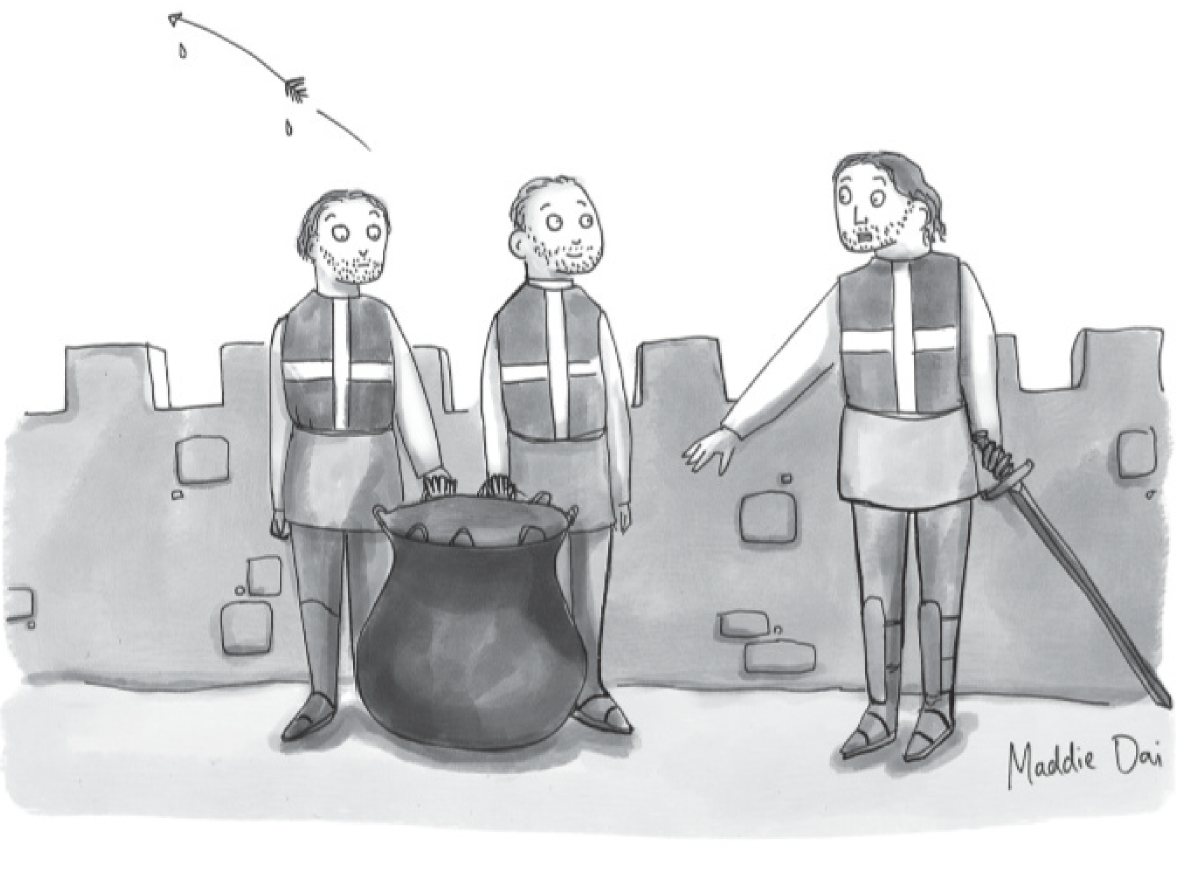
"Anxiety disorders come in small, medium, and large," Sweeney goes on. "The truest anxiety disorders are untouched by the coronavirus. Real O.C.D. behavior isn't paranoid caution. It's magical thinking. I wash my hands every day *not* from fear of germs but because I was frightened once and I washed my hands and nothing bad happened. It's about not stepping on the cracks in the sidewalk. It's not hygiene; it's a flailing attempt to manage my emotions."

Isolation, he says, can make things harder for those with anxiety disorders. "It deprives us of the set of invisible things that bolster our everyday plateau," he says. "You no longer start off every day at a neutral baseline. 'I have the love of my family, I have purpose and accomplishment, the satisfaction of work'—that's like two milligrams of Prozac. Now I throw the coronavirus crisis on you: you no longer have even the small pleasures. The single strongest Prozac out there is social support. It's the single best emotion manager—and look what happened to our social support!"

Those most exposed to the disaster, the front-line health-care workers, have tended to have the discipline of the soldiers they are compared to. One doctor who is working in urgent care at a hard-hit hospital in the Bronx (and who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprimand from his superiors) explained the basic psychological transaction that is central to the American way of healing: we come to our doctors with symptoms, they diagnose or prescribe, and we feel better simply for the exchange. "But if you show up at urgent care now with symptoms of COVID there's no treatment I can prescribe," he said. "This can make some patients *extremely* belligerent."

In the early weeks of the pandemic, when there was a shortage of testing, patients were especially angry. "There were even security guards posted at various urgent-care stations," the doctor said, acknowledging that mixed messages from public officials, news reports, and emergency clinicians created enormous anxiety. "They have every right to be upset and frustrated. 'My father is sick. How can you possibly deny me this test?' And that's the worst place to be, as health-care providers, where folks are hearing something different from us than from political leaders. It makes them distrust us, and it's very undermining."

At the peak of the crisis in New York, doctors in urgent and emergency care were exhausted, but, as with front-line soldiers, commitment and adrenaline seemed to be powerful shapers of behavior. "We have exquisite meticulousness over our safety procedures, and I



"If it wasn't boiling, all we did was lightly dress the enemy."

encourage everyone around me to not get lazy," the Bronx doctor said. "Wearing an N95 is downright painful after six hours. But I'm not finding much anxiety. As long as we have access to the right equipment, that anxiety is put to rest, and I can worry about my patients more than about myself. It's, like, I don't think the National Guard minded going into Afghanistan. It's what they signed up for. We don't mind getting called out to take care of acute-care patients—*if* we're given the armored Humvee to drive. If I'm sent in knowing that the mission is critical, well, we've all signed up for that."

According to Karen Binder-Brynes, a New York psychotherapist who specializes in trauma, that's a familiar attitude. When the pandemic first hit the city, she warned, "The one thing we've learned is that you can't go in and counsel them now. That's why it's called *post*-traumatic stress disorder." Binder-Brynes worked with firefighters right after September 11th, and, in 2005, after Hurricane Katrina, she went to New Orleans to treat first responders and clergy members. "It just takes time," she said. "People's brains are still too activated for us to treat their minds. I helped run a program at Mount Sinai Hospital—we had a grant to study the biology and psychology of survival—and what happens is that all of our brains get in a highly activated state, every siren and every ambulance does it. That's why you may hear people saying, 'I'm exhausted at five o'clock.' We're also seeing this in the first responders: hyper-adrenal output of cortisol and adrenaline. They go home and have three days off, and they go into adrenal withdrawal."

She went on, "Right now, what they're dealing with is people who can't be saved, and death after death after death. And doctors, without a patient's family members present, are sometimes having to make unbelievable 'Sophie's Choice' decisions. Right now, they are in battle mode, like firefighters running into a fire. Right now, all you're doing is surviving the night."

That highly activated state, Binder-Brynes has found, can also lead to a loss of normal emotion. "Here's the saddest thing that I know is already happening," she said. "It happens in war zones, with therapists on the front line, and it happens with doctors and nurses. Compassion fatigue can start setting in. People start not feeling, not being able to feel: O.K., we lost another one. And then people get truly depressed—that they're no longer feeling." As the months go on, the toll of this relentless pressure is becoming clear, with reports of rising anxiety and depression among health-care workers, whose struggles range from trouble sleeping all the way to suicide.

Around the city, New Yorkers have kept up the seven-o'clock ritual of clapping for essential workers. "The clapping is great for all of us. I think it's a great unifier, and it's very reassuring that we're all in this together," Binder-Brynes says. "But there is some discomfort among front-liners about constantly being called heroes, because they will tell you they're just doing their jobs. And, especially early on, they were losing a lot of patients. They don't always feel like heroes."

In January of 1920, as the Spanish flu swept through Europe, it claimed the life of Freud's fifth child and favorite daughter, Sophie. Just as Darwin's biographers argue about whether and how much his daughter Annie's early death affected his ideas—perhaps emboldening him to publish what he had previously kept private—Freud's biographers have argued about whether and how much Sophie's death in the pandemic affected his theory of the "death instinct." He was certainly overwhelmed by it, in his tight-lipped bourgeois way, and his sense of helplessness and of unexpected intersecting catastrophes seems eerily contemporary. In a letter, he wrote:

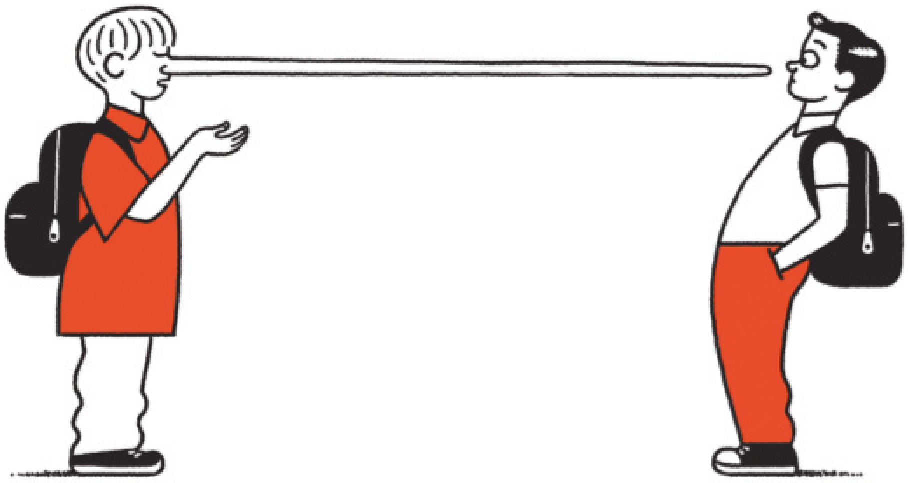
> That afternoon we received the news that our sweet Sophie in Hamburg had been snatched away by influenzal pneumonia, snatched away in the midst of glowing health, from a full and active life as a competent mother and loving wife, all in four or five days, as though she had never existed. Although we had been worried about her for a couple of days, we had nevertheless been hopeful; it is so difficult to judge from a distance. And this distance must remain distance; we were not able to travel at once, as we had intended, after the first alarming news; there was no train, not even for an emergency. The undisguised brutality of our time is weighing heavily upon us.

The undisguised brutality of our time. Many therapists have decided to cast aside a pose of dispassion to meet their patients' unprecedented needs, becoming coaches or "supporters." But they also observe that these needs are rapidly changing. Leonard Groopman says, "Over the first few weeks, the disease went from being an abstract, distant concept to something closing in on us, as people knew people who were sick or hospitalized. And then people settled into their routines, and have come to accept that they're at home. And it's shifting, with people being now frightened by what happens afterward. What kind of world will we find after we walk out of our door? You know the rabbinical interpretation of why the Israelites had to wander in the desert for forty years? It's because the older generation, born in slavery, had to die off. I think that older people are going to have a much harder time adapting to the new world that's coming. I see radical politics, new ways of living, a kind of Weimar New York, coming into being."

"The truth that people bring the neuroses that they already had to therapy in crisis times is true in another way afterwards," Binder-Brynes says. "People bring out of the crisis the strengths that they had before the crisis that helped them survive it. Shtetl people tended to survive the Holocaust better than middle-class people, not because they were morally superior but because they had coping strategies from their life before." She is the co-author of a study of Holocaust survivors and their children. "What's needed is hope, not faith. The difference? Faith is about the moment; hope is a vision of the future. People of faith tend to collapse in crisis. What helps people survive is specific hope for a nameable and better future. But some losses remain losses."

Almost a century ago, Freud wrote, while mourning Sophie, a few words that were meant to be about individuals but that might also be about a city and a way of life: "We know that the acute sorrow we feel after such a loss will run its course, but also that we will remain inconsolable, and will never find a substitute. No matter what may come to take its place, even should it fill that place completely, it remains something else. And that is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating a love that we do not want to abandon." ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS



LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

SOME OF YOUR THIRD-GRADE FRIEND ALEX QUIPLY'S BEST LIES

BY KYLE MOONEY

"The police sometimes ask my dad for his help to solve crimes."

"There is a tunnel under my house that leads to the mini-mart. I can steal candy, if you guys need it."

"Some of your favorite video games are based on drawings that I did."

"My uncle is a millionaire and wants me to work with him."

"I quit soccer because of my uncle and my work with him. It's very important."

"I told you what my uncle does. He works with computers."

"Well, not exactly computers. Machines that can get you inside computers."

"Yes, I've gone inside one."

"It is true. If you come over to my house, I can show you."

"No, today is not a good day."

"No, I can't today, either. My uncle is very mad."

"Somebody is trying to steal his plans for the machine. He thinks it's his old partner."

"His name is Ernie Mancini. He used to be my uncle's best friend. He has a big scar on his forehead. He's very bad."

"Correct. I can't come to your birthday party because Ernie Mancini is looking for me."

"No, it's not because I spend weekends at my dad's. Again, Ernie Mancini is a bad man. He has killed several people, and his soldiers are out to get me."

"Listen, I like you. At school, we're bordering on a best-friend relationship. The reason we never go to each other's house is that I made the mistake of getting myself involved in my uncle's business. Do you think I like being on the run from Ernie Mancini? Do you think I like having my molecules mixed up with computer data because of all the travel I do with the machine? The answer is no. And, as I said, my dad does not live forty-five minutes away. He lives here, with me and my mom and my annoying sister, Christina."

"Your parents are wrong. If you don't want to believe me, fine. But I also want to add—and I feel like an idiot saying this for, like, the hundredth time—that when you go inside a computer it's best that you don't wear name-brand clothes. That's why you usually see me in this striped shirt all week, or in that oversized red one. I have better clothes at home. It actually kind of sucks how much name-brand stuff I have at my house. But, hey, I asked for this life, and, at the end of the day, my responsibility is to the war that's being fought inside the computers."

"Awesome! That actually works out better for me. I don't really need a friend right now. The truth is that the rebels inside the computer have made me their chief, so I won't really have time for the kid stuff that you and Bryce get into. Lyxia, probably the sexiest of the Datanoids, has been flirting with me on our cyber-safaris, so I, too, think it's better that I focus on my own stuff. Which reminds me: I should probably recharge my Lust Sword. And also, just real quick, I am definitely allowed to eat things like fast food and pepperoni pizza. Someone was saying—I think it was Scott C., maybe?—that our family eats only healthy foods and generic oatmeal. Not true. We eat all the best kinds of bad stuff for you. I'm actually getting hungry just thinking about it. Of course, I also eat computer chips. That's customary in Datanoid culture. And, real quick, my dad did not lose my family's money and cheat with Kristen Hildreth's mom and then get confronted by Kristen's dad and lose a fight to him. Trax was saying (he's my best friend and my sidekick in the computer world) that the whole Kristen's-dad-fight thing was probably a rumor started by Dreadacore Warriors."

"O.K., yeah, I'll see ya, dude. Even though we're taking a break from our friendship now, I'm sure we'll rekindle it. We're moving to Dallas after the summer. It's a better place to hide from Dark Dread and his Dreadacore goons. But I promise that I'll be easy to track down. Definitely won't be a name that will haunt you for the rest of your life, with you intermittently looking it up through the years with no results."

"Well, that's my ride. No, not the bus. There's a Speeder Pod just beyond it. Gotta go. Peace!" ♦

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

CLOSE QUARTERS

The house share was a haven. Then COVID struck.

BY MICHAEL SCHULMAN

PAY RENT
Z z z

The apartment, in Bushwick, has been a queer-friendly community of strangers.

Samuel and his friends found the apartment in 2014. They were all in their twenties, mostly Bard graduates, living in a Victorian house in Prospect Lefferts Gardens, Brooklyn, which held ten people. But the owner was selling, so six of them found a place in Bushwick, where they could keep living together as a big, happy postgraduate commune. It was a duplex on the top two floors of a small building, part of a row of new residences across the street from a Baptist church. "It looked like any new construction: bare white walls, wood floor," Samuel recalled. "It had almost no character at all." But it had a washer-dryer, lots of bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a roof-deck, where, on a clear night, you could see the lights of the bridges from the Verrazzano up to the Queensboro.

On move-in day, Samuel, a soft-spoken photographer who wears rimless glasses, arrived first. "I got the keys, and I sat in the empty apartment until everyone showed up with the U-Haul," he said. Alone, he made a recording of the silence interrupted by the chirping of a faulty smoke alarm. In the Victorian, he'd had the smallest bedroom, so he quickly claimed a nice room on the lower floor, which, he soon realized, was not well insulated from the noise of the common area. The roommates—artists, academics, and service-industry workers (Samuel sells fish and pork at the Union Square farmers' market)—trucked over the street-scavenged brown-and-beige striped couch from the old house. They painted the living room yellow and teal and filled it with plants. Someone had a pyrography kit, and they burned their names into a wooden sign for the front door, along with the half-ironic, half-aspirational name Sky Palace.

Inevitably, people started moving out, and others moved in. McSherry, a blond, punkish guy from suburban Maryland, arrived in 2015. He had moved to New York three years earlier, after studying dance at Sarah Lawrence, and had embraced Brooklyn's queer night-life scene. For a time, McSherry, who is trans, did drag under the name Princess Mickey Jäger, with an androgynous look that combined heavy makeup with glued-on facial hair. He eventually quit the night-life world, and, as he considered what to do next, he thought about leaving the city. But his friend Claire was looking for someone to sublet her room on the top floor of Sky Palace for the summer, and McSherry grabbed it. "I'm very much a nester, and, if I hadn't found this apartment when I did, I would have left New York," he said. The other tenants were considering dropping the lease, but McSherry said to them, "Guys, are you kidding? This apartment is great!" He stayed on, painting his room a deep-fuchsia shade called Diva Glam.

Javier moved in around the same time. A licensed beautician from Fresno, with a gelled pompadour and a thin, dark beard, he had come East in 2014, to pursue hairdressing. Years earlier, he had worked at SeaWorld San Diego, dressed as Big Bird in a "Sesame Street" play area, and one of his co-workers had a couch that he could crash on, in Sunset Park. He found a job at a salon, and eventually worked up to hair styling for a spread in *Vogue Arabia*. The SeaWorld friend told him she and the other tenants were losing their lease, and he heard about an open room in Bushwick. (He later found out that she had lied to him, and had stayed on in Sunset Park after he left.) When he showed up to look at it, he knocked on the wrong door. "You're not the girl

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDY REMENTER

we're expecting," the guy who answered said. Javier was at Sky Palace, which happened to have a room available, too. He took it.

Javier's boyfriend, Aziz, came two months later. Tall and thin and partial to knit beanies, he had emigrated from West Africa in 2013 and become a nursing assistant. At first, the only person he knew in America was a friend from back home, Lemine, and they lived together on DeKalb Avenue. But the relationship was tense; their mothers gossiped about them back in Africa. "I'd had enough of it," Aziz recalled. Sky Palace protocol discouraged couples from sharing bedrooms, so Aziz took the cheapest room, which had a skylight but no windows or air-conditioning.

In September, 2018, Shannon moved in. She knew McSherry through the queer party scene and had been bouncing between bad living situations: an Elmhurst apartment with a cheating boyfriend, a West Harlem place with a former co-worker, who "started telling me every week that my rent was increasing." Shannon, a trans woman with auburn hair and a Valley Girl drawl, was recovering from a gender-confirmation surgery when she moved into Sky Palace. She took over the windowless room from Aziz, who moved to the room next to Javier's. By the time Erik arrived, this past February, Samuel was the only original tenant. Erik, a redheaded thirty-year-old with a B.F.A. in acting, was subletting from a multidisciplinary artist called Candystore, whose top-floor room he'd found on Facebook. "I love the Sky Palace," Erik told me, earlier this spring. "Because everyone does help each other and support each other, but it is not expected that you be everybody's emotional life coach."

The apartment had turned into a queer-friendly community of strangers. McSherry grew basil and cilantro on the roof and kept the house supplied with fresh flowers. There was a mild bedbug infestation in 2016, and an ongoing mouse problem. For a couple of months, there was a cat, and for a few weeks there was a bulldog named Woman, which was returned after she wouldn't stop growling at one tenant. Rents range from six hundred and sixty-six dollars to eight hundred and sixteen dollars a month. Cleaning is done without a chore wheel. "We meet every few months, and we talk about how almost all of us could be doing a better job of cleaning," Samuel said. "Then things get a little better for a while, and then they get a little worse again, and then we have another meeting."

For the most part, though, McSherry told me, "conflicts usually are smoothed over relatively quickly." Javier and Aziz broke up around New Year's, but neither moved out. When Shannon (who asked to be identified by a pseudonym) fell three months behind on rent, the other roommates covered for her, so she wouldn't be out on the street. She soon got a job at a Trader Joe's in Manhattan—she also worked part time as a political canvasser—and started paying them back. But she smoked pot in her windowless room, which irked other house members. "Javier is extremely averse to having any smoke in the house whatsoever," McSherry said. "Whereas Shannon felt that it was her right to use her room however she liked." At a house meeting in December, Javier made a speech about everyone being more accountable in 2020. "We were starting over as a unit," Shannon told me. "And then COVID happened."

In mid-March, as the city was shutting down, the housemates met over pizza to discuss protocols. They agreed to keep alcohol wipes by the entrance, to sanitize the door handle behind them, and to wash their hands after coming in. Each person would be limited to one guest at a time.

But there were frustrations. One day, Samuel was trying to get to the coffeemaker while Javier was fixing a sandwich. Samuel noticed Javier's dirty dishes in the sink and started loading them into the dishwasher. When Javier said he was planning to wash them, Samuel snapped, "Whatever was on my hands, whether it was viral or not, is on the dishes now, so I'm putting them away." He told me later, "It was a passive-aggressive moment of weakness."

Living with strangers is normal in New York City, a way of weathering too-damn-high rents and shifting life plans. In my twenties, my Craigslist roommates included a cocktail waitress and an Australian marketer for a sexy-underwear company. Cohabitation often rested on a tenuous peace, dependent on a degree of avoidance. Staggered work schedules meant that everyone could shower at different times. Occasionally, there were carefully worded e-mails, or muttered complaints by the refrigerator, but minor disputes—like whether to keep on the hallway light on Saturdays—got drowned out by the bustle of life.

Sheltering in place forces roommates together and raises the stakes on everyday squabbles: cleanliness is potentially a matter of life or death. You're only as safe as your least-careful roommate. One friend of mine repeatedly scolded a roommate who refused to stop going to parties or to wash his hands, until the guy moved out in a huff. Another friend became ill with what seemed like COVID-19 while subletting in Brooklyn; whenever she went into the common area to eat soup, her roommate would slam the bedroom door and send a nasty text. "To be inside of all this, like we all are, with not only zero love around me but actual hate, as I'm sick, is a loneliness that is a new deep for me," my friend wrote me. (She has since recovered.)

At Sky Palace, the roommates were suddenly much more present in one another's lives. McSherry, who normally works as a Muay Thai instructor, went on unemployment. Javier, who had put aside hair styling to study theatre design, lost a gig as a barback at the Barclays Center, and his classes were moved online. Samuel came down with a headache after taking groceries to a sick friend who'd been in Milan; then, after sharing a joint with a guy who'd been exposed to someone who'd tested positive, he called in sick at the farmers' market out of caution. But it was impossible to keep the wider world at bay. Aziz works at a nursing home and was terrified of bringing the virus there. "My conscience would never let me live if that might happen," he told me. Shannon kept working at Trader Joe's, where the employees were initially advised not to wear face masks, per C.D.C. recommendations at the time. She joined an effort to unionize the tenants on their street to go on a rent strike, keeping her distance as she knocked on doors.

Two days after the COVID house meeting, Erik, whose work running tech at cabaret venues had dried up, flew back to his family home, a farm in Ohio. "I could not abide the idea of being in New York for months on end with nothing to do," he told me. At the time, he had lost his sense of taste and smell, which Shannon later told him was a symptom of COVID-19—but he had also just quit cigarettes, so his body was on the fritz. (He never found out if he had the virus.) The house was down to five.

The roommates noticed that Shannon was suddenly having a lot of male visitors—up to four a week, one of whom Javier saw using the shower. (Shannon insists that none of her guests used the shower.) She had lost her canvassing gigs and was doing sex work to make up the income. One night, in the kitchen, she was expounding on how worried she was about the virus. Javier, washing dishes, barked, "You're bringing strangers in the house, so you're obviously not worried about it. So just end your story there. I'm not going to pity you."

The two had always got on each other's nerves. "We're like brother and sister," Shannon said. "He's a Capricorn, like my mom, so it's a very love-hate relationship." Javier told me, "I can be opinionated about certain things, especially going on five years of experience from all the tenants I've seen come and go here." Early one morning, he sent a photo of Shannon's dirty dishes to the house text thread, with the message "Is this a quarantine prank?" Shannon charged out of her room and screamed at him. She told me, "I'm not a morning person. It was just one of those roommate moments where you're, like, 'Listen, there's just so much worse happening than this fucking dish in the sink.'" She had been up late the night before. "Her heart is very much in the right place," McSherry said. "But she burns herself out and lacks self-awareness around her own limits at times."

McSherry took Javier and Shannon aside for a two-hour conflict-negotiation session, using techniques he had learned from the queer group the Radical Faeries, whose retreats he'd attended. He asked each to speak only when holding a talisman—they used a ceramic saltshaker shaped like a man's shoe—and to begin sentences with "I," not "You," to avoid placing blame. Javier confronted Shannon about her mooching: in January, he had offered her ten press-on nails he'd brought home from an internship, and she ended up raiding the whole pack. Javier agreed that Shannon could smoke inside if the weather was too bad for her to use the roof. "I thought that meeting would squash everything," Javier said. "And it just came back worse."

On the last day of March, the roommates held another house meeting, to discuss the impending rent. But it turned into a referendum on Shannon's intransigence, especially when it came to her sex work. "What's the point of me being quarantined, if you're still going to be exposing me to strangers?" Javier asked her. Shannon shot back that Lemine, Aziz's friend from Africa, had come over a few nights before. Aziz, who tries to stay neutral in conflict situations, was furious; Lemine had been self-isolating and had just stopped in to pick up money for his mother. "I told her to never ever compare Lemine to all these people that you have left and right," Aziz recalled. He demanded, "Tell me *one* of their names."

Shannon argued that she had been under enormous strain, between organizing the tenants and being an essential worker at Trader Joe's. "I'm trying to get some coin," she said. Javier, who had chastised her earlier for falling behind on rent, was not impressed. "All I heard her say was '*I* am working, *I* this, and *I* that,'" he recalled. "And I was, like, 'Listen, it's about time.'" At that, Shannon stormed off and slammed the door behind her.

The same day, a friend asked Samuel if he could take care of her cat for a while, in Fort Greene. He moved out that weekend. "The fewer people in the house right now, the better for everybody," he reasoned. That left four.

Javier and Aziz met on a dance floor, at two in the morning, in 2015. "I was, of course, drunk," Aziz recalled. "And he was, too." They stayed until closing time and exchanged numbers. The next day, Aziz invited Javier over for a spaghetti dinner. They fell in love.

Aziz had been in America for less than two years. In West Africa, where he lived in a strict Islamic community, he had worked as an accountant at his family's oil company, while spending evenings caring for his older brother, who had A.L.S. When the brother died, in March, 2013, Aziz had a breakdown. He told me, "You cannot tell your family you're gay. They would kill you, and they would die before that, too. So I took everything that I owned and booked my ticket and I came here."

His first days in New York were difficult. He spoke almost no English. Whenever he ordered at McDonald's, he accidentally got something with bacon, which as a Muslim he couldn't eat, so he would throw it away and try again. For months, he didn't make eye contact, which was customary back home but appeared rude in New York. His English instructor at LaGuardia Community College encouraged him to look up and smile, but he still made mistakes. One day, on the subway, he reached out to hold a stranger's baby, which would have been normal in West Africa, and the mother screamed at him. "I thought it was going to be more happiness, more gayness, more joy," he said, of America.

His first apartment was in Washington Heights, but his Dominican neighbors kept trying to speak to him in Spanish, so he and Lemine moved to an Afro-Caribbean part of Flatbush. Aziz's experience caring for his brother inspired him to train as a health aide. "When I moved here, I said, 'Let me do something that I want to do,'" he told me. "So I had to start from the bottom." He became a certified nursing assistant and got a job at a nursing home and rehabilitation center in the far reaches of Brooklyn, where he works, from 6 A.M. to 2 P.M., with patients recovering from medical procedures. His commute is more than an hour, requiring a bus and a subway, and he usually stays after his shift ends, to hang out with the residents in the dining room.

His breakup with Javier had been inevitable. Javier enjoyed going to museums and parties, whereas Aziz was usually too exhausted from work. When Javier found a gay-friendly Catholic church and invited Aziz to join him for midnight Mass, he showed little interest. Aziz says that the problem was Javier's moodiness. "I have a very moody mother—crazy bitch—and I suffered a lot from it," he said. "Having someone

THE EIGHTH DAY
BUT WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN??
L FINCK

that matches her perfectly on a daily basis was too much for me to handle."

Nevertheless, they stayed close after the breakup, with just a wall between their bedrooms. "Aziz is my main partner in crime, my confidant," Javier told me. He conceded that their relationship might become more fraught if one of them started seeing someone new, but right now "that's not an option." Since the pandemic hit, things have been ambiguous. "It's weird," Aziz told me in April. "Yesterday, we kissed on the mouth."

Nursing homes are particularly susceptible to outbreaks, so Aziz started bringing a full change of clothes to work. By mid-April, a handful of residents had tested positive and were immediately isolated. Aziz began wearing an N95 mask on top of two surgical masks, which made it so hard to breathe that he would get dizzy spells. "You see depression on their faces," he said, of his patients. "They cannot get visits. They don't know what tomorrow gonna be." He would come home drained, have a drink, and fall asleep by nine. He worried about contracting the virus from Shannon. Aziz said that he asked her privately to cut down on visitors. "She was, like, 'Oh, my God, I cannot deal with this!'" he recalled. "You know, it was all about her. In my head, I was, like, 'Wow, you're so selfish.' But you know what? Now I know."

On Friday, April 17th, Shannon turned the oven all the way up to five hundred degrees to make pizza, then retreated to her room. Javier, who was writing postcards home, saw smoke and switched the heat off; Shannon stormed out and berated him. She thought he was always hogging the kitchen. From her room, she texted the group, "Please do not shut the oven off without letting the person know trying to put something in the oven. Thx!"

"I'm sorry," Javier wrote back. "The house was in smoke . . . won't happen again, please don't be slamming things and cursing me out." Shannon responded with a blast of texts:

> You can communicate that shit. This is getting out of hand.
>
> You are taking up the entire apartment and cooking mostly every night. And this goes for everyone. I have had 2 times this week I could use the kitchen and I've felt attacked when I do. So we all need to come up with a communication system that works better when there are ppl at home all day and then there are ppl who are working their asses off in essential services for fucks sake
>
> Plz do not tell me to censor myself I'm 28 and I'll fucking express how I feel to whomever I choose. I'm getting pissed off now and that's why I'm in the group chat because we are not getting along and this apartment is NOT WORKING FOR ME

McSherry, playing diplomat, wrote back, "You have the autonomy to behave however you like, but it's extremely childish to slam doors and yell when you get upset. none of us gets to live exactly like we would if we lived alone; we all make compromises in consideration for one another."

A moment later, Shannon replied:

> Literally fuck u
> Fuck you ALL

"I'm just a very honest person," Shannon told me, a couple of days later. "I don't really believe in passive-aggression. I believe in conflict." Her life before Sky Palace had been rocky. She was brought up in a working-class town in western New York State. She went to college in Arizona on a music scholarship, then transferred to Brooklyn College in 2012, to study linguistics and film. After living in what she describes as a "slumlord coke-dealing-landlord situation" in Bensonhurst, she moved to Jersey City, to be closer to a bad boyfriend. When they broke up, she recalled, "I had to move everything by train, all my belongings. I didn't have any resources and had no friends anymore, because I was with someone who was abusive toward me." For a while, she worked at American Apparel, but, she said, "I was just, like, I don't know what I'm doing with my life." McSherry helped her find a job at a restaurant, while she was recovering from getting hit by a cab.

In 2014, she began experimenting with gender expression, wearing crop tops and nail polish, something that wasn't safe to do back home. She started transitioning the month before Donald Trump was elected. "Being trans, everything is political for us," she said. Bernie Sanders's loss in the 2016 primary

"O.K., in three . . . two . . . one . . ."

• •

pushed her toward community organizing. She started working in Amnesty International's canvassing division, where she tried to unionize her co-workers. She says that she was demoted to a part-time position after missing work. A few months later, she filed a paid-sick-leave complaint with the N.Y.C. Department of Consumer Affairs and was awarded $3,434.70. She struggled on and off with depression and alcoholism. Last spring, she was elected co-chair of a local branch of the Democratic Socialists of America, but meeting new people made her anxious, so she drank to boost her confidence. "I basically was really messy," she said.

Before the pandemic, she had scheduled a glottoplasty (to raise the pitch of her voice) and a consultation for a facial-feminization surgery, but both were cancelled. Part of the reason she had started the sex work, she said, was to save up for additional procedures. She told me, "If I didn't have surgery, I would kill myself." But she realized that the activity posed a health risk to herself and to others. "If I don't work, I might lose my apartment," she said. "But also we need to rent strike. It's very confusing for me."

She maintained that the riskier job was at Trader Joe's, where hundreds of customers passed through each day. After two of her co-workers were thought to be infected, the store closed briefly, for a deep cleaning. In order to avoid contact, she volunteered to work in the spoiled-foods and donations area, but she still had to do shifts at the checkout, where customers could be snappish. She was skeptical of the outpouring of gratitude for essential workers. "I think people are appreciative that they're able to get their groceries," she said.

Some days, her duties included standing on the sidewalk and making sure that customers were wearing masks. But, at home, she showed little interest in obeying the rules. After the oven incident, she texted an apology to the group, saying, "My bipolar is coming out." But the damage was done. Javier blocked her number. McSherry offered to be out of the kitchen by eight every night, but he was spending more time at a boyfriend's place in the Bronx. "It sucks for us to be in this space when it feels like there's unresolved conflict," he told me. "I don't think Javier feels any confidence that Shannon would be willing to come to any kind of compromise. And he's probably right. She feels comfortable just standing her ground and icing people out." By late April, Shannon was dating one of her clients, whom she called her "COVID boo."

The roommates stayed in their bedrooms as much as possible. "If Starbucks was open—or *anything* was open—I would have preferred sitting there," Aziz told me, on a day off. He was trying to study for prerequisite courses to get his nursing license, but he couldn't concentrate: "It's like a little prison over here. Depressing. I wish I had some Xanax." He preferred being at the nursing home to being at Sky Palace. Samuel came over one day to do laundry, but he didn't stay long. He extended his cat-sitting gig through the summer. "Watching this stuff remotely rather than being embroiled in it gives me a little perspective," he told me. "At this point, I have no desire to re-sign the lease at Sky Palace, but I don't have a plan to get out permanently yet, either."

As May approached, the tenants' union expanded throughout Brooklyn. McSherry had been involved in organizing from the start, but then Shannon took the baton, posting flyers and knocking on doors. The organizers distributed a form e-mail for tenants to send to their landlords, saying that they would negotiate through the union.

But Sky Palace was not a united front. Javier and Aziz were nervous about joining the rent strike. Aziz had no savings, and he worried that their landlord would evict tenants who participated in the strike. "I cannot afford that stress, to have a month to find a place in New York City," he said. Javier was also wary. He had grown up in a low-income Mexican-American household—his mother works at Walmart, and his father is employed at a food-packaging plant; both are now "essential workers"—and learned to be careful with money. "My mother would always tell me, 'We can't afford that, but when we can we'll buy it,'" he recalled. He is the only member of his immediate family to have left Fresno County, and the first to finish college.

In mid-April, Javier learned that ten of his relatives, all of whom live together back in California, had tested positive for COVID. And Shannon was driving him crazy, constantly asking the roommates to sign for packages, which arrived in a steady stream. "To her, this is like a shopping spree. Woo-hoo!" Javier said.

One day, Shannon casually mentioned to Aziz that she was selling drugs. He thought she might have been joking, but she later told me that it was true. "I have not a second of time to spare," she said. She was Skyping from her room, her hair in braids, applying blush before a john arrived. The packages had mostly been splurges or gifts from clients: Gucci sunglasses, a Nintendo Switch, a clock made from a Lana Del Rey LP. "I saw a client in Jersey the other night, and I got a gaming keyboard. And a knife—a really nice one, if anyone fucks with me," she said, flicking it open.

She misted herself with perfume. Trader Joe's was now screening employees for symptoms, and she had been sent home with a cough, which she chalked up to allergies. "If I die, I die," she said, shrugging. She flashed a letter from the government: she had been receiving food stamps, but now the benefit was being discontinued on the ground that she hadn't submitted her information—"even though I did." She wasn't worried; she now had multiple income streams to cover any back rent she might owe after the rent strike (if she chooses to pay it at all), and also to fund her "new bougie life style." She told me, "Money is the most important thing to me. It insures my stability."

But her illegal activities frightened Aziz. "This house is going to be on the list to watch," he told me. "I don't like that. I'm an immigrant! It's not cute." At the nursing home, the virus has spread to at least fifteen residents, and six have died. "It's literally every other day," he said. The staff was short on protective equipment, and Aziz heard rumors of co-workers testing positive. But he couldn't get tested unless he had symptoms. He warned Shannon, "You're putting everybody in danger." She doesn't remember the confrontation. "My life is risky already," she told me. "It's nothing new for me, honestly."

In May, all the roommates except Aziz withheld rent; Javier said that he might pay at the end of the month. Samuel, who was still in Fort Greene, wasn't surprised by the lack of solidarity. He was hoping to find another cat-sitting gig after the summer, or maybe crash at a kimchi farm upstate. He was unsure whether he would ever return to Sky Palace. "Things boiled that probably would have stayed simmering," he said.

No one knew what would happen when the lease came up for renewal, in September. "I don't think that both Javier and Shannon will stay," McSherry told me. "Either Javier will try to rally the troops and convince the rest of the house to kick her out, or he will be unable to convince everyone else to ask her to leave, and he will decide to leave."

Shannon told me that she had no plans to move: "It's a simple yes. I'm staying." Her year and a half at Sky Palace had been the longest she had lived in one place as an adult. And if her roommates wanted her out? "They can sue me," she said. "They all had an option to leave and they didn't, and that was their decision. What did they think I was going to do, just quit my job and stay in my room all day without seeing anyone?" But, a week later, when Javier tried to call a house meeting, she refused to attend, saying that she would be moving out in the fall. "I can't stand it here anymore," she said.

The nice weather had given the roommates more opportunities to escape the tension, and some had taken up cycling—but, unlike many of the young people crowding city parks, they were serious about wearing masks. At home, they practiced their own form of social distancing; what was once a casual collective was now a failed state. The living room was like Times Square, a deserted thoroughfare.

One Saturday in May, a tempting, sunny afternoon, Javier and Aziz went to Lemine's house to help him with some renovations. The couple's romantic embers had dimmed. "When everything started, Javier was always making jokes, saying, 'Oh, we can arrange a good therapist and get back together,'" Aziz told me. "No way! I did not ask for that." Javier's harshness with Shannon was more evidence of his moodiness. Aziz said, "When he passes by you and he's having a bad day, you can see it in his face."

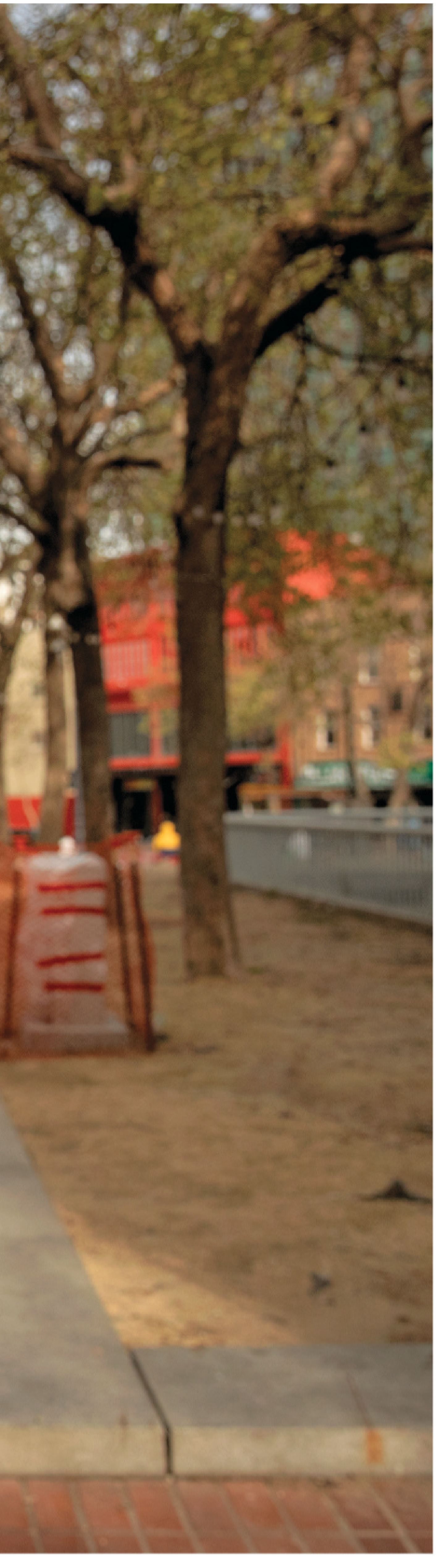
Shannon was tanning on the roofdeck, while McSherry, who had been planting zinnias and basil earlier, stayed in his room, avoiding her. That morning, Javier had sent him a long text complaining about Shannon's drug dealing and her visitors, but McSherry was done playing peacemaker. "I'm, like, 'I don't know what you want from me, buddy,'" he said. "I am annoyed by some of her habits and behaviors, but I don't expect her to change, so I'm not about to invest a lot of energy in negotiating with her."

McSherry had always thrived in group scenarios. He grew up in a large extended Irish-Catholic family and went to boarding school at thirteen. In 2015, he made his first trip to a Radical Faerie sanctuary, in the woods of Tennessee. It was an open and accepting space, and McSherry had been struggling with "the way to do my gender thing." He returned the next summer, and he recalled taking acid while wearing a blue-and-gold muumuu and coming across people skinny-dipping in a waterfall. "It felt like walking back into the Garden of Eden," he said. He began hormone therapy soon afterward.

But the past month at Sky Palace had tested his faith in communal living. "The six of us who live here have never formed a cohesive enough group to be committed to refining our dynamic together," he said. He had resolved to move out when the lease is up. "I just turned thirty this year, and I've known for a long time that family, for lack of a better word, is really important to me," he said. "Not necessarily family in the child-rearing sense, but in the domestic-unit sense. It's time for me to start seeking that in a really intentional way. I'm done writing it off as something that will just happen for me when it's time. I want to be building a home with people I love, and I want it now." ♦

CALIFORNIA
TRUT

Zach Hickson lived in a tent in San Francisco, but he saw in the city an opportunity to rebuild his life. "It was a place where



I could do what I wanted to do," he said.

LETTER FROM SAN FRANCISCO

TOO FAR FROM HOME

What one city can teach us about the crisis of the unhoused.

BY NATHAN HELLER

Zach Hickson arrived in San Francisco to stay three years ago, at twenty-seven, because nowhere in America seemed more appealing at the time. The city was mild and fragrant. The streets on clear days had a liquid energy, and seemed to offer opportunities that he hadn't had before. "It was a place where I could do what I wanted to do," he told me recently. He began to call the city home.

Hickson was brilliant. He was brought up in a military family, on the gritty south side of Houston, with an I.Q. higher than both of his parents'. He struggled to fit in, got in some fights. When he was a teen-ager, he saw "Into the Wild," the rugged adventure movie starring Emile Hirsch. "As long as I can remember, I just wanted to travel, and I was told it wasn't possible," he said. "I saw that movie and thought, There's a way." He left home at eighteen with his best friend, who had terminal cancer. They hit the road, staying no more than three days in any one place, because Hickson wanted him to see as much of America as possible. When his friend died, everything went dark for a while. Hickson kept travelling. He visited all forty-eight contiguous states, and, when he realized that he'd mostly seen just gas stations, he visited all forty-eight again, camping in national parks.

Hickson was enterprising. He made money by hunting exotic minerals and rocks. During the winters, if he wanted, he would get a job doing manual labor someplace warm. He would usually be hired as a stopgap worker, and, when employers saw his work, he was often asked to stay, and was sometimes put up in motels. Hickson is slender, not tall, with a dusty-brown farmer's beard and distant blue eyes—a boy's gaze added to the visage of an older man. In time, he got two words tattooed across his knuckles: "LIFE" on the left hand and "LOVE" on the right.

Hickson was interested in psychedelics. One day when he was twenty-five, he was taking L.S.D. under a tree in Cave Junction, Oregon, when a young woman approached and introduced herself. Her name was Elena Aytim, and she collected rocks, too. They spent the next several days together. "It got to be where we couldn't get anything done, because we couldn't stop looking at each other—everything disappeared," Hickson said. "We would just lie in bed together and talk, and all of a sudden the sun would be going down."

They travelled on together, and Hickson started calling her his wife. As they grew close, he learned that, as a teen, in Ohio, Aytim had got hooked on opioids after a car accident, and had moved on to fentanyl before kicking the habit. She confessed that she had recently relapsed with heroin, and she worried that Hickson would turn her away. Hickson said he wouldn't; he himself had started drinking heavily after his friend's death. "I was, like, 'Hit me,'" he recalled saying. " 'If I don't understand, I'll figure it out.' "

He started using heroin with her. "I had control of it until she lost control," Hickson said. "Then I'm, like, Fuck it, I'm getting high, because I can't stand watching this." The addiction quickly turned into a workaday grind. Every morning, he'd wake knowing that he'd have to earn enough money for a dose; otherwise, he would collapse into a days-long flulike illness.

That was when they decided to live for a while in San Francisco, which was known for its good public programs for getting people off drugs. They couldn't find an apartment—the median monthly rent for a one-bedroom in the city is now, by one estimate, about thirty-five hundred dollars—but they were used to camping and decided to make do. It was only after settling in that Hickson realized he had fallen into

PHOTOGRAPH BY PRESTON GANNAWAY

a bigger rut. He was now one of thousands of homeless people in the city living on the streets.

Homelessness afflicts nearly one in five hundred Americans. As a crisis, it's insidious, because its victims rarely plunge toward the abyss; they slide. Maybe you've been couch surfing in between jobs and you overstay your welcome. Maybe you've been in Airbnbs while apartment hunting and the search is harder than expected. Maybe, like Hickson, you lived on the momentum of a private dream until you had a reason to put down roots. Camping, couch surfing, "digital nomad"-ing—all these things are seen as normal middle-class activities, so the line between being without a home for now and being homeless is thin. Like a hiker crossing from France into Italy, you often don't know where you are until you look around, hear locals talking, and realize that you've entered another country.

D., a punctilious woman with straightened hair, who had been living in San Francisco family shelters with her son for about ten months, told me recently, "We're *not* some of those forever-homeless people—it happened, and it's never going to happen again." (She asked to be identified by her first initial because a lot of people she knows read this magazine.) D. had worked for years as a broadcast journalist, and was living in Las Vegas when her son's father got colon cancer and died. Afterward, she went to San Francisco, where she'd gone to college. Finding a job, as a classroom aide for special-needs students, was easy. But she struggled to find an affordable apartment. When I met D., her days began at 6 A.M., on a mat on a shelter floor. She dropped her son off at fifth grade, then went to her classroom to teach.

D. is one of many homeless San Franciscans who can "pass" as housed as they go about their public lives. For others, the signs of the predicament are more pronounced. "You see some things that you really don't want to see," Kyriell Noon, the chief impact officer at the Glide Foundation, one of the city's leading centers for homeless services, told me. One Wednesday morning, I walked from the downtown waterfront to Glide—a mile or so—and passed eleven people visibly in crisis. Two were on their feet, shouting at no one; another sat, bare-legged and smoking. A woman with a baby carrier clutched a sign that read "I HAVE NO JOB. I HAVE 3 KIDS," and a trembling old man sat on a walker and ate seeds. Two young guys wandered, wrapped in blankets; another crouched on the ground; and a fourth, toothless, slumped on a newspaper box. A man on a corner could have been a commuter but for his sign: "I NEED MONEY AND MEDICINE. PLEASE GIVE IT." This was all before I reached the sidewalk in front of Glide, which is crowded with people in need.

Such sights aren't new to the Bay Area, whose homeless population spiked in the eighties, when the Reagan Administration cut the budget of the Department of Housing and Urban Development by seventy-eight per cent. But impatience and resentment have intensified. Between 2013 and 2017, calls to 311 about "homeless concerns" went up by nearly eight hundred per cent, and many residents have made a sport of swapping stories of incursions from the street: human feces on the sidewalk, tents blocking children's paths to school. In January, a man reported being chased by a homeless person wielding a hypodermic needle who cried, "I am going to stab you!," after being reproached for shooting up in public view.

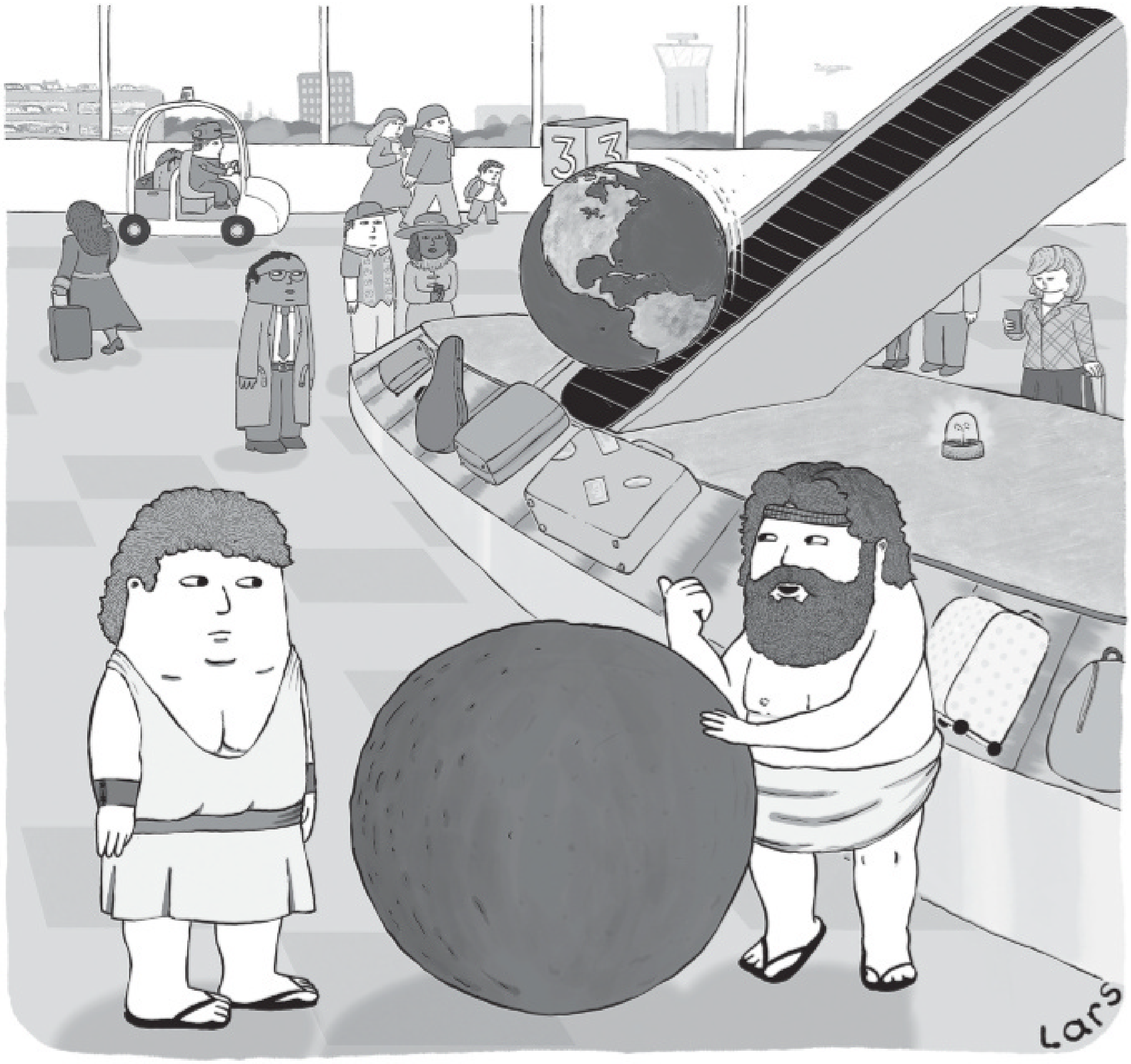
These complaints, like many fears about a menace from the disadvantaged quarters of society, have reached the President. On the day after Christmas, Donald Trump tweeted, "Nancy Pelosi's District in California has rapidly become one of the worst anywhere in the U.S. when it come to the homeless & crime.... Along with her equally incompetent governor, Gavin Newsom, it is a very sad sight!" Newsom announced several new homeless-assistance efforts in his State of the State address this year, including a nearly seven-hundred-million-dollar call to fund medical treatment and housing. "You have all lost patience, and so have I," he said.

In truth, the California crisis isn't an extreme. New York City has a worse per-capita homelessness problem than San Francisco, and is home to fourteen per cent of the United States' homeless population. Three-quarters of low-income people across the country who needed housing help last year did not get it, and California's proportion of homeless residents trails that of New York; Washington, D.C.; and Hawaii.

The problem in California is simply more visible. New York City has shelter beds for nearly every homeless person. San Francisco has beds for approximately forty per cent. Homelessness figures are notoriously squishy, but San Francisco officially reported 8,640 homeless residents in 2002—a peak—and almost as many in 2019, suggesting that, even as these numbers have fluctuated over the years, the high-water marks have been consistent. Yet a new wave of development in the city has brought the unhoused into public view. "The Dogpatch and Mission Bay area used to be fields and warehouses," Kenneth Kim, a senior director at Glide, said. "For a long time, no one really saw the people in tents there—they'd be in meadows or squatting in unused commercial buildings." Now such areas are filled with offices and condos, and the people who once lived there have no place to go.

San Francisco spends more per capita on homelessness solutions than nearly any other U.S. city—three hundred and thirty million dollars a year. That sum reflects an eighty-five-per-cent increase from 2005 to 2015, when homelessness rose by thirteen per cent. It's puzzling that so much funding did so little. But the puzzle also makes San Francisco, a city that has tried some obvious things, a great place to think through more focussed solutions.

With COVID-19 shutdowns imperilling the middle class, the need for answers has grown desperate. San Francisco's homeless population is now an epidemiological tinderbox. "It's already a crisis, and when you layer on top of that coronavirus, coupled with the vulnerability of the homeless population, it is a potential catastrophe," Glide's president and C.E.O., Karen Hanrahan, told me. Homelessness is where



"Oh—you're right. I see mine now. Sorry about that!"

the most acute American nightmares of this era meet, and San Francisco has a way of making what is hidden elsewhere visible. Ever since the recent tech boom turned life in the city upside down, all the paraphernalia of American society—the wads of cash, the access keys, the drugs, the nubs of ideology—has been spilling out of San Francisco's pockets, into an enormous pile on the street.

One morning before COVID-19 overtook the city, I walked to the St. Anthony Foundation, another center for the city's homeless, in the Tenderloin, a wedge-shaped section of downtown that has a reputation for being haunted by the living. Unhoused people gather in the district partly because it's a place where they know that their presence won't turn heads. When I arrived, the kitchens and the stockrooms at St. Anthony's were bustling. Preparations for the nearly three thousand meals served at the center every day begin at 6:30 A.M. Three lead chefs command six industrial kettles, a phalanx of assistants, and ovens that together can hold thirty-nine sheet pans at once. St. Anthony's also offers a computer lab, a free "shop" for toiletries and donated clothing, and medical and substance-use-disorder clinics. Guests with disruptive mental illnesses or what's known as "extreme hygiene" are often offered food to go. "It is very difficult for us to serve someone who has three-, four-, or five-day-old feces on them," Lydia Bransten, the dining-room manager, observed. Yet dishevelment is not always a sign of negligence. "People don't approach you if you're smelling really bad," she explained. "There are protective mechanisms happening there, especially with women."

During lunch, I manned the watercooler while diners wandered past with trays. One young guy I met gave me an elegant précis of Niels Bohr's work in quantum mechanics, and then told me that, while meditating, he once left his body to commune with angels. "I know it sounds crazy!" he said. I thought it seemed normal-ish for Northern California, as did most of the other things I encountered. The unhoused population in the dining room included loudly dressed middle-aged men, young people with dangling earbuds, and elderly Asian women wearing polyester slacks. One of the longest-serving volunteers at St. Anthony's, a retired woman named Monica Incerti, told me that her work sometimes had an eerie, edge-of-the-cliff feeling. "I couldn't have worked here in my twenties or thirties or even forties," she said. "I would have felt as if I could have been here myself."

In San Francisco today, people who earn less than eighty-two thousand dollars a year—or a hundred and seventeen thousand for a family of four—are considered low-income. (The figures for individuals in New York and Seattle are, respectively, sixty-four thousand dollars and sixty-seven thousand dollars.) The city's minimum wage is $15.59 an hour, which means that a minimum-wage earner working forty-hour weeks with no vacations will gross $32,427.20 a year—far less than the median rent for a one-bedroom. Working a job in town while living in a distant suburb adds transit costs.

Concerned parties often talk about helping homeless people find jobs, but many homeless people whom I spoke to *had* them. "It's not unusual for people in the shelter system to be working during the day," T. J. Johnston, who helps run *Street Sheet*, a long-standing newspaper sold by the homeless to support the homeless, said. Johnston was going to the office to report and edit, and to a shelter to sleep. It's not the life that he expected. He had earned a B.A. at the University of Massachusetts and worked at the Census Bureau and elsewhere before becoming unemployed and falling behind on his rent. D., the special-needs instructor, also college-educated and fully employed, told me, "Someone housed today, unless they're making eighty thousand dollars a year, could be homeless tomorrow. That's the bottom line."

Since 1970, "real income" in the United States—income adjusted for inflation—has been nearly flat. But the costs of major purchases (houses, cars, education) have increased ahead of inflation. Why? Zoom in and you find that during the same period one demographic *did* experience an increase in real income: Americans above the ninetieth percentile of income distribution.

In San Francisco, big money is made not in wages but in equity—for example, as stakes in highly valued companies—and this wealth notches up the costs of major purchases. Regular homeowners, feeling the cost-of-living pinch, realize that they can get money, as loans or rent, from the suddenly enormous value of their homes. That extra cash allows the cost of living to keep climbing. Some homeowners liquidate and bail, replaced by people better suited to such rarefied financial air. Everybody else, the paycheck people, might leave if they can, headed for somewhere—Detroit? Atlanta?—that's a few years behind in the cycle. Otherwise, they, too, stay, and slowly feel the bolts of their once steady lives come loose.

For those whose finances were precarious to begin with, the risk is worst. There are disproportionately high rates of homelessness in places with multigenerational poverty cycles, and in historically marginalized populations. (Six per cent of San Francisco's general population is black; thirty-seven per cent of its homeless population is.) Listening to people's cries of pity for "the homeless," though, one often feels that these laments do more to protect the privileged identity of middle earners nearing the edge than they do to express compassion. A 2018 study by the University of New Hampshire and Zillow found that homelessness numbers started climbing when median rent exceeded twenty-two per cent of median income, and shot up when it reached thirty-two per cent. In San Francisco, despite its high salaries, the median rent-to-income figure rose above thirty-nine per cent. A professional can earn what even a decade ago would have appeared a princely wage and still feel a cold updraft from the gap below.

That's alarming, because San Francisco, Seattle, Boston, and New York are not outliers when it comes to economic trends; they're leading indicators. "It's one thing to have high employment," Jose Ramirez, the executive director of St. Anthony's, who was homeless in his youth, told me. "But, if you can't hold one job that provides you with enough financial stability to have your own place or put food on the table, what good is that?" For people constrained in this way, one well-placed crisis, personal or national, causes everything to come apart.

THE ESTUARY

The brown bear living near the estuary,
and wading out when the tide swells and the salmon run,
during the days of the dwindling salmon runs,
and slapping with his big right paw a hook-nosed fish
whipsawing inland to spawn,
the ambidextrous bear,
furred like the forest from which he emerged,
waddling into the unteachable waters
to swat the salmon out the fast-running tide
and catch the red salmon in his mouth
and toss and juggle the sockeye salmon
thrashing and drowning in the air—
and when he's expressed himself completely
he catches with his jaw the self
that swam ten thousand miles to the estuary
and daintily, mincingly, with one paw grasping
the caudal fin and the other the head,
eats that salmon as if he were we
and the fish an ear of boiled corn—
that bear is a bear about whom rich and complicated
feelings can be felt. That is a bear from whom ideas
about the state of nature can be derived.
Cruelty is the wrong word to describe

What distinguishes the United States from other countries is, in part, the force of a certain romantic dream. We purport to honor those who make their own ways on untrodden paths; we build room for risk because we value the rewards. If we're able, we strike out on a path at eighteen. If we fail—with time to spare—we try to start again.

True to their hopes, Zach Hickson and his wife kicked heroin in San Francisco through treatment with methadone. Hickson immediately decided to return to school. Since 2017, community college in San Francisco has been free, and Hickson enrolled at City College, in a two-year associate's program in community health work. He had already trained to be an H.I.V.- and hepatitis-test counsellor, a credential that he noted to me with some pride. "I wanted to go to school so I could do that better," he said.

Hickson and Aytim had moved out of a tent and into a "navigation center"—essentially, an upgraded shelter. The centers, which began operating in San Francisco in 2015, partly to house a conspicuous homeless population in advance of the Super Bowl, are meant to serve not as landing pads but as runways. In theory, people get a case manager and are put on a path to housing. But there aren't enough housing options, so many wind up parting with pets and belongings to meet shelter requirements, spending a few weeks at a center, and then returning to where they were. In eighty-four per cent of visits to navigation centers, guests left without having been placed in housing.

The city currently has 3,462 shelter beds available. The mayor, London Breed, who grew up in public housing, was elected in 2018, after her predecessor's death. Around that time, she promised a thousand more beds by the end of 2020. But, by the most conservative figures, there are still about four thousand more people than beds on any given night. When I first spoke with T. J. Johnston, the *Street Sheet* editor, he was commuting to work from a shelter where he had a ninety-day reservation. The citywide waiting list for shelters was nine hundred people long.

A number of unhoused people told

the pleasure he gets from playing with his lunch.
Play and life are the same thing to him,
art and life, life and death.
Creation impinging on a consciousness
clear and crystalline. Pinpoint revelatory
explosions unsoiled by words, unbesmirched.
Creation clambering out of the waters,
shaking itself off, creation
surrounding itself with itself . . .
Stay down on the pavement where you just fell in a heap
like a bag of laundry, just stay there. Move even a
little and you might damage something else.
You've already done plenty of damage.
Stay down, supine. Stay down,
and let the giant buildings loom over you, let them
in their abstract imperium stun you with their indifference.
Wasn't that the reason you built them in the first place?
Stay down, stay down, and ask yourself:
"Could I be the bear in this fable?"
"Could I be the fish?"
"Could I be whoever is imagining all this?"

—Vijay Seshadri

me that they prefer living on the streets to staying in shelters. "I find it safer," Richard Day, a sixty-two-year-old who has been homeless for seventeen years, said. He ran a contracting company until he got addicted to cocaine and his life unravelled. Now sober, he lives by himself in a spacious tent with a battery-operated TV, and his grandkids visit once a month. In a shelter, he would face theft and be forced to sleep among addled strangers. "It's safer to hide my tent away," he said. "You have to have that for your own peace of mind." Safety concerns are particularly acute for women, L.G.B.T.Q. people, and families.

At the navigation center, Hickson's days followed a strict schedule. Early each morning, he and Aytim rode a bus to a methadone clinic, then took another to City College for a 9 A.M. class. In the afternoon, he worked as a volunteer at Glide, and headed to a different campus for night classes.

Small irregularities derailed the routine. If the methadone counsellor was late, Hickson would miss his morning class. If there was trouble at the navigation center, the bottom fell out. One day, he and Aytim quarrelled. They were expelled for disruption, and had to return to their tent, which they dismantled every morning. On a rainy dawn, he watched Aytim struggling, and felt a wave of shame. "Seeing her getting rained on, even if she didn't complain, hurt me," he said. "And I can't do anything about it, and that makes me angry. We ended up fighting about stupid stuff."

Hickson left City College, and spiralled fast: "It was, like, What do I do? Being off opioids is most important, so I'll drop out of school and figure out my housing situation. But then I was depressed about dropping out of school and living in the rain, and I ended up back on opioids again. That was all in a month."

Homelessness in San Francisco is what's known as a systems problem: cause and effect seem woven together in a complex wreath. Hickson's ability to stay in school depended on his methadone treatment, which was hard to balance with the logistics of both school and life in a tent. If it hadn't also been a rainy El Niño year, the whole arrangement might have worked.

A wreath-shaped problem cannot be unbraided, but it can be simplified, and that is what St. Anthony's tried a few years ago, by focussing on its own city block. The foundation's buildings, on Golden Gate Avenue, are near Larkin Street Youth Services, for homeless youths; the De Marillac Academy, a Catholic school; St. Boniface church; and a preschool called Wu Yee. For years, the mix of daily foot traffic—young and old, churchy and kite-high—was disastrous.

Yet the block is now pristine. Change came when everyone agreed to treat the individuals who slept on the sidewalk not as interlopers but as residents. At 6 A.M., the people in tents gather up their possessions. The sidewalks are hosed down. For several hours, St. Boniface opens its pews to homeless people, and by 8 A.M., when school begins, the sidewalks are clear. From 10 A.M. to 1:30 P.M., a line forms at the St. Anthony's dining room. Then the kids leave school, the light fades, and the tent dwellers return. They clear away their things again each morning because the needs of the kids were explained to them, and they made sense.

In "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" (1961), Jane Jacobs described successful neighborhoods as ecosystems held together by human difference; they depended on coördination among individuals, not on aesthetic ideals or notions of "proper" use. The Bay Area could learn from the St. Anthony's block in this respect. People, housed or unhoused, need space to live without feeling under siege. You can't subtract one functional space, like a sidewalk, without adding useful space elsewhere, especially space where people can set down their belongings and rest.

Nothing on the St. Anthony's block is a remedy for homelessness, but the harmony shows that it is possible to create shared space and resources on a small scale—also known as a community. In San Francisco, somehow, things seem to fall apart as the system begins to grow. What does that look like, and why is it happening?

"There were two hundred and sixty tents in my district when I started—I know, because we counted," Hillary Ronen, who was elected to the city's Board of Supervisors in 2016, told me in her office one afternoon. Ronen used to be a lawyer for immigrant workers; now she represents a district that includes the Mission. Under pressure from constituents, some of whom had been finding pots filled with feces and urine on their steps, she has led many of the city's nonpunitive attempts to get tents off the streets. "I was getting complaints from people who felt horrible complaining," she told me. "People who said, 'I volunteer in homeless shelters, but I'm at my wit's end.' "

Ronen got a developer to loan the city a vacant building, on South Van Ness Avenue, and turned it into a navigation center. She sent a team to talk to the homeless: "Word spread. 'They're serious. This navigation center is a safe place. You can come and go like an adult. You aren't treated like a child. You truly can bring your partners, pets, and belongings.' " People were allowed to stay as long as they needed to secure a path out of homelessness, provided that they seemed to be trying. Within two months of the center's opening, in 2017, the number of tents in the district dropped to thirty. The shelter closed after its yearlong lease was up, but it became the template for a new generation of navigation centers across the city, like the one where Zach Hickson stayed. The expansion, Ronen said, was disastrous.

"The city took what we did in the Mission, dumbed it down times ten, and spread it all over the city," she told me. The new centers, assembled by three different agencies, did little outreach to either neighbors or people in tents, and put limits on how long people could stay. Ronen saw the number of tents in her district climb again.

It is easy to think the lesson here is that all problem-solving should be local, but that idea presents problems of its own. Ronen's navigation center, like the St. Anthony's block, depended on specific, highly motivated people. What happens if she leaves office? What if St. Anthony's moves away? Policy, by contrast, can outlast its best actors.

Yet warring theories have emerged on what that policy should look like. The founding director of the city's four-year-old Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing, Jeff Kositsky, is a data-and-systems guy. He hoped to create a single integrated system of care for homeless people. "We had a bunch of nonprofit fiefdoms and a bunch of departmental fiefdoms," he told me. He started a program called Coordinated Entry. Instead of going to whichever aid organizations they happened to hear about, homeless people were interviewed, prioritized, and pointed toward services and housing options that seemed suited to their needs. Kositsky's approach could be called democratic-egalitarian—making sure that everyone gets equal access to the front door.

The other strong view in town is what could be called the communitarian idea: we ought to draw on existing relationships and shared identities to serve people as individuals. "Solutions need to be rooted in the specifics of our smaller communities," Laura Valdéz, the executive director of Dolores Street Community Services, a nonprofit that provides housing and immigration help, often to Latinx residents, told me. "It cannot be a one-size-fits-all model." She doesn't like Coordinated Entry; she has watched people enter Kositsky's system and get sent off for services in unfamiliar neighborhoods, their fate unknown to those who care.

"Her and her damn shoulder bag."

Both democratic-egalitarian and communitarian ideas have a rich lineage in left-of-center thought. We want a society in which everyone gets equal public support; we also want a society in which those same people are at liberty to build their own communities and conduct their lives in private ways, whether that means sending kids to Black Panther community schools, living under Hasidic law, or, as with Hickson, hitting the road. In San Francisco, the collision of these ideologies has caused aid structures to fall apart before they're fully built, and the casualties are the people most in need.

The block of St. Anthony's leads to one of the city's grimmest corners. On its south side, Golden Gate Avenue, chatty drinkers huddle with carts of their belongings. On its east side, Jones Street, substance-using people sit or lie down, wrapped in soiled clothes and dirty blankets. Traditionally, the most jagged period on the streets is between the seventh and the tenth of each month, the end of one benefits pay cycle and the beginning of another, when withdrawal symptoms start to set in. I came by on the eighth.

People often speak of "the homeless" as a monolith, but the population is subject to its own hierarchies. Living in a vehicle can seem a step up from a tent. Older people often lament the ways of today's homeless youths. "On that corner, they do meth all night long," Rachel Elizabeth Haynes, a sixty-three-year-old who lives in a tent, told me. "When we were using drugs, in the seventies and eighties, you could not go out on the street and have a *needle* sticking out of your *arm!*"

I wanted to meet some residents of

the corner, because the voices of such people—those not visibly striving to escape their lot—are often ignored in articles written for readers seeking heroic stories of the downtrodden reaching for middle-class success. A gray-haired, wispily bearded man there, Martin, has lived in the Bay Area for twenty-eight years, five on the street. He gets a disability check for mental illness and has occasional appointments with a doctor, whom he trusts. But he looked exhausted. "It's hard to get sleep," he said. "The police officers are always moving you along in the morning."

"*Kumbaya*," Hugo, to Martin's right, offered. He grew up in San Francisco and came to the streets six years ago. Sometimes, because of his mental illness, he has episodes and stalks up and down the sidewalk, yelling and beating his chest.

The high number of mentally ill people on the streets—about half the homeless population, by some estimates—is often blamed on "deinstitutionalization": a process that began in the fifties and intensified in 1980, when President Jimmy Carter, worried about conditions in mental institutions, funded community care centers instead. The next year, President Reagan cut that funding, permanently stranding patients between the old and the new models of care. But the streets themselves are bad for mental health, too. "If you've ever been on a trip where you got bumped off your flight and you're stuck in an airport, with no hotels—well, two days of that and we're broken, right? We get home and are, like, I can't even think! I need a glass of wine!," Lydia Bransten, of St. Anthony's, told me. "This is people's life day to day to day out here. They don't know when the plane is coming."

After Hillary Ronen's navigation center closed, she became convinced that poor mental-health care was at the heart of her district's problems. With another supervisor, Matt Haney, she put forward a program, supported at the last minute by Mayor Breed, called Mental Health S.F. The program, which is still being rolled out, will create a mental-health center where any homeless, uninsured, or mentally disabled San Franciscan can get free care.

On the corner, Martin opened up a black plastic bag that contained his essential belongings: toothbrush, toothpaste, vape, comb. Hair was hard to deal with on the street, he explained. He worried about scaring the passersby, so he had got his hands on some pomade to make himself presentable.

"Hugo and Martin, these are people others will actively take pictures of, put up on the Internet, and say, 'This guy needs to be taken down by the police,'" Bransten said. But the unhoused on Jones Street aren't, in general, comparably resentful. A few yards up the block sits a mosque, AlSabeel Masjid Noor Al-Islam. A year ago, following mass shootings at mosques in New Zealand, some homeless people from the neighborhood kept watch outside AlSabeel during services, taking shifts guarding those inside.

In 2018, to address complaints about tents, the city formed a coalition called the Healthy Streets Operations Center, which is now frequently accused of trying to chase away the city's homeless problem with police. Jeff Kositsky began leading the center in late winter, after leaving his department. "I don't think law enforcement is the right approach," he told me before taking the job. "And I can tell you the chief of police agrees with me."

"It's not a crime to be homeless," the chief, William Scott, told me, describing the center as an effort still finding its way after a neighborhood-based precursor. "For the first two years, we really made a lot of progress in cleaning up the areas that we were focussed on. Then we expanded, to go citywide, and started to learn that there were some issues."

The history of the law and homelessness is vexed. In 2010, Newsom, who was then the city's mayor, proposed a "sit-lie" law, allowing police to ticket people lounging on the sidewalks between 7 A.M. and 11 P.M. Voters approved it, but enforcement dropped amid controversy. In 2016, another ballot measure made it legal for officers to remove tents, with twenty-four hours' notice, and to put their inhabitants in shelters. Breed has supported the effort. "If people don't pack up and move, or agree to services, we have a responsibility," she told me. "To let them set up shop and use drugs in these tents—and to continue to impact public health in the way they are—is not something we're going to tolerate."

Breed visited people living in tents on the Embarcadero, San Francisco's downtown waterfront, in an effort to move them into a shelter. "I went out with a team twice to have conversations with people, and to get an understanding of what they're dealing with," she said. "It was absolutely insane—most of the people did not take us up on the offer."

People on the streets described a different dynamic with officials. One afternoon, I had a late lunch with Couper Orona, a former firefighter who retired young, after a major back injury. When her relationship fell apart, some years later, she started living in a tent by the junction of Interstate 80 and Highway 101. She put her E.M.T. skills to use in the encampments, cleaning wounds and reviving overdose victims. She has often found herself at odds with the police. "We're not used to being treated nice," she said.

We were sitting at a restaurant not far from Orona's R.V. (an upgrade, thanks to a benefactor, from her tent). Orona, who describes herself as butch, sported a fauxhawk and a flannel shirt, and in her right ear she wore an earpiece connected to a police scanner, which she uses to track "sweeps" of tents. ("We don't do sweeps," Breed told me.) When police officers move homeless people off the streets, they're supposed to "bag and tag" their belongings for safekeeping in a warehouse. But Orona alleged that some officers chase people away with threats of arrest and classify their property as "abandoned," allowing it to be discarded. ("It's a system that is not a perfect system," Scott said. "I'm sure there are people who have had bad experiences. But that is never the intent.") Homeless people have complained of losing identity documents, H.I.V. medications, and the ashes of a relative. Hickson lost family photographs

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that he had carried during his travels.

"I want London Breed to come with me for twenty-four hours, no cameras, no nothing," Orona told me. "I'll dress her down, put her in a baseball cap. I want to take her to the Bayview, have her watch the sweeps, and show her the way her officers treat these people. If she does that, I will wear a dress for twenty-four hours. I'm not fucking kidding." She added, "My mom would freak out."

One view of homelessness is that wages haven't kept up with the cost of living; another is that housing has failed to keep up with growth. In California, many blame stunted housing development and Proposition 13, under which property taxes are based on the value of a house when it was purchased, as opposed to its current value. The fixed tax encourages people to hold onto their houses, and, as employees in newly created jobs arrive, they have to seek other places to live, leading to high prices and growth by sprawl rather than by density. California's stringent zoning and construction regulations are further impediments to matching supply with demand.

By some estimates, seven hundred thousand units, more than two-thirds at affordable levels, would be needed to balance the market. Fans of zoning deregulation and Manhattan-style density often call themselves YIMBYs (for "Yes, in my back yard"). As the *Times* journalist Conor Dougherty notes in his crisp and sane new book, "Golden Gates: Fighting for Housing in America," San Franciscans mostly agree on basic points—"More housing generally, more subsidies for those who needed them"—but disagree on what should come first.

Breed has invested heavily in affordable housing but has been a critic of regulation and bureaucracy that hinder development. In the fall, she declined to support a proposal, passed unanimously by the Board of Supervisors, to increase the fee that office developers pay to help fund affordable housing. She argues that the city's subsidy coffers are already overwhelmed by needy outsiders, such as Hickson. "We are a magnet for people who are looking for help," she told me. "There are a lot of other cities that are not doing their part, and I find that larger cities end up with more than our fair share." Whether this seems like a plausible explanation depends on how one reads the data: seventy-one per cent of homeless people in San Francisco previously had homes in San Francisco, so most of the city's homelessness is homegrown.

Like many who oppose YIMBY-style growth, Jennifer Friedenbach, the executive director of the Coalition on Homelessness, an activist group, worries that loosening the rules will benefit the affluent first. "All of those homes they want to build with no local control and no community process? That is *never* going to be housing for homeless people," she told me. She conceded that the city's review process for new construction is annoying and friction-prone, but she said that it's the only lever advocates have for getting big, lucrative projects to accept more affordable units.

In recent years, many in the city's tech industry have funnelled cash toward their own solutions. People who work with the homeless are grateful, but some told me that, aside from a few highly strategic efforts—such as a thirty-million-dollar initiative launched by Marc Benioff, the co-founder and C.E.O. of Salesforce—the industry's gestures can be naïvely misdirected. For that reason, many advocates think that money raised through taxes is more valuable. In 2017, the Coalition on Homelessness proposed taxing companies with gross receipts of more than fifty million dollars and channelling the funds to homeless services. The mayor opposed the idea, but it gained support from local powers such as Benioff and Pelosi, and passed as Proposition C. The tax has raised three hundred million dollars annually. But, for now, that money remains unavailable, ensnared in legal challenges from the business world.

One afternoon, I stopped by the Delancey Street Restaurant, whose dining room has a fancy, old-fashioned style: wood panelling, thick white tablecloths, small arrangements of flowers in the center of each table. A waiter in a crisp white shirt and a black bow tie led me through a hallway to a private dining space, where I met Mimi Silbert, who has run the Delancey Street Foundation, the restaurant's parent organization, since the nineteen-seventies.

"People call us the Harvard of the underclass!," Silbert, who exclaims most things, exclaimed to me. If many San Franciscans think that the remedy for homelessness rests with exterior forces, Delancey Street believes that it starts with the individual. "Communities happen when other people all help each other, not when some wonderful people are helping with the problems," she said. Homeless people, gang members, neo-Nazis, and other untouchables arrive at Delancey, have their hair cut short, and aren't allowed to use the phone for three months. They are given housing and jobs—as cooks or maître d's in the restaurant, perhaps—to help them build skills for aboveboard life. In time, they receive vocational training, and can pursue a high-school-equivalency degree. There is no staff; senior residents preside over the greener ones. Anyone who uses substances or threatens violence is expelled. "We kind of make an outside version of you—we don't go in and do therapy before we have an outside that's successful," Silbert said. After a stay of at least two years, residents are sent back into the world.

Silbert, who has feathered copper-colored hair and a taste for well-built blazers, has been a mentor figure both to Kamala Harris and to Gavin Newsom, who visited Delancey Street for nightly therapy in 2007, during a rough patch in his personal life. In recent years, however, the Delancey tenets—tough love and a pressure to assimilate—have fallen out of fashion. "That's a very old-school therapeutic model, where they shame people all the time," Paul Harkin, a former head of Glide's harm-reduction program, told me. (Harm reduction is about merely containing the worst effects of substance use.) It's a model that can also cast homelessness as a personal failing, further cordoning off unhoused people's lives. Last year, Silbert attended local meetings to challenge the city's plan to put a navigation center near the restaurant. She told me, "I'm not opposed to it—I wanted, right here, in this *particular* area, not to have people who are allowed to use drugs."

Others at that meeting were more resolute, launching a nonprofit, Safe Embarcadero for All, to oppose the shelter, and a GoFundMe campaign for the war chest. The public response in San Francisco was abhorrence.

"The idea that we don't like poor people or homeless people living next to us is preposterous, because the Delancey Street Foundation is right there," Wallace Lee, a member of the Safe Embarcadero board, told me. In his view, homelessness stems primarily from drug abuse, and he worries about needles and strung-out people in the neighborhood where he is raising children. "Housing wouldn't solve the issues that led people to homelessness," he said.

The mayor, most harm-reduction advocates, and even Lee support the use of supervised-injection sites, where patients dose themselves, with clinicians overseeing the process and disposing of needles. The obstacle to their creation has been federal. In 2018, when San Francisco and Philadelphia revealed plans for such sites, Rod Rosenstein, then the Deputy Attorney General, announced that the Justice Department was prepared to arrest clinicians and clients alike. Meanwhile, injecting on the street would remain just a ticketable offense. For people with addictions and no home, the choice of where to shoot up was clear.

Stigmatizing drug dependence, as in the Delancey Street model, seems to help some people break free of the vortex of homelessness. But destigmatizing it, as at the supervised-injection sites, appears to help others. Contradictions like this one are a reminder that every structural problem is a problem of *human* structures. In terms of survival, there is nothing mortifying about camping on a sunny street corner, just as there's nothing mortifying about camping in Big Sur. Within the architecture of a culture, though, one represents a lack of access and provision. When society speaks of people "on the streets," then, it's trying to locate its borders of belonging: whom as a community, small or large, we carry as our own, and who remains beyond the boundaries of our care.

The novel coronavirus came early to San Francisco, freezing the city in place and bringing a new sense of urgency to those without homes. Couper Orona decided to occupy a vacant house one afternoon in May. Working with a group called Reclaim S.F., she and an unhoused friend entered an empty investment property. Before the police arrived to chase them out, Orona opened the bay windows and paused there for a long time, looking at the city from inside.

Ordinarily, in small facilities with stable, hygienic residents, infection is controllable. Maria, a busy young mother of two whom I spent some time with, had recently been barred from a family shelter while her fourteen-month-old daughter was contagious with the measles. "It makes sense because of the kids," she told me. But add mental illness, drugs, and extreme hygiene into the mix and a shelter can become to sickness what a field of dry brush is to fire. Last year, Newsom decried the spread of what he called "medieval" diseases, such as typhus, among the homeless population. COVID-19 looked worse. "Many homeless people are at heightened risk because of their age or underlying health conditions," Karen Hanrahan, of Glide, said.

On March 17th, Breed joined other local officials in implementing the first shelter-in-place restrictions in the country. The shelter where T. J. Johnston was staying stopped accepting new residents, took temperatures, and began practicing social distancing. Capacity was reduced by seventy-six per cent at shelters citywide. St. Anthony's dismissed its volunteers and turned its block into a battle station, with meals to go, mobile hand-washing stations, and a medical triage tent on the sidewalk. (These measures increased the foundation's monthly operations bill by two hundred and forty thousand dollars.) When the city's hotel-occupancy rate fell by about ninety per cent, the Board of Supervisors saw an opportunity.

"The city was procuring hotel rooms for people who were COVID-positive or needed to be quarantined," Hillary Ronen explained. Why couldn't the homeless, infected or uninfected, use those rooms, too? Hotels agreed to make at least eighty-two hundred rooms available. The city leased two thousand hotel rooms, equipped with special staff and services, for high-risk residents, but the mayor resisted broadening the effort to the general unhoused population. "Let's be honest," she told me. "There's no way we're going to be able to keep anyone who's addicted to drugs in a room against their will."

On April 2nd, the first San Francisco shelter resident tested positive for the coronavirus. That same day, the city opened a large "distancing shelter" in the Moscone Center, a convention building. Rectangles for each resident were marked with masking tape on the floor. Entrants were given a floor mat, a pillow, and a metal folding chair. They were not allowed to bring belongings with them. On the day the shelter opened, *Street Sheet* reported, no hand-washing stations could be found. Two weeks later, the Board of Supervisors unanimously passed an ordinance requiring the mayor to house seven thousand homeless people in hotel rooms. When nothing had happened by May 12th, a group of activists calling themselves Housing Is the Cure projected "Breed, Obey the Law" across the façade of City Hall.

On May 19th, the supervisors unanimously passed another ordinance, this one requiring eviction protections, medical-response protocols, and other special supports in S.R.O.s, where there had been a fifteen-hundred-per-cent increase in COVID-19 cases since March. The numbers for the unhoused were alarming, too—as of last week, there were a hundred and fifty-nine confirmed COVID-19 cases and one death among the city's homeless population, and many unhoused people had begun avoiding shelters in favor of the street. On May 4th, U.C. Hastings College of the Law, in the Tenderloin, joined locals in filing a federal suit against the city for "deplorable" sidewalk conditions. The number of tents had more than doubled since the shelter-in-place order went into effect, to nearly four hundred. "What has long been suffered in the Tenderloin has become insufferable," the filing read. The law school's chancellor and dean, David Faigman, had read about a judge ordering Los Angeles's mayor to move some tent occupants into shelters or other safe sites (bypassing normal political processes) and hoped to get similar action from Breed.

Starting on May 11th, the city moved fifty tents to what it called a "safe-sleeping village"—an approved encampment—in a small plaza in front of the main library, and the city began planning a second in a parking lot at the foot of Haight Street. The safe-sleeping villages offer safely distanced tents and meals, and are surrounded by a fence. Some observers have called the sight "dystopian"—especially in the middle of a prospering city with thousands of vacant hotel rooms—but others, such as Faigman, hope that the model will spread. "We need to insist that those who are in tents be told that they have to move to encampments," he told me. "There will be more-than-adequate provisions for their safety and health—but they don't have a choice."

People with a long view tend to think that the way past homelessness is what is known as permanent supportive housing: a home that comes with social services. One afternoon, I met a woman named Tina Singletary in Fremont, southeast of San Francisco. She has lived in an apartment there for two years, after spending a quarter century in a tent, mostly with her partner, Billy Hunting. Singletary had told me on the phone about her time on the streets—a past that included struggles with her health, drinking, and losing custody of her kids—but she greeted me with a warm host's smile. Upstairs, I met Hunting, who has blond hair and extensive scarring from two severe burn accidents, and who wore a yellow T-shirt that read "I'M JUST ONE BIG FREAKIN' RAY OF SUNSHINE."

"Living here has changed everything for us," Singletary said. "When we moved in, I didn't know what to do with my damn self. You could put something down, leave, and it would still be there—no one would steal it! You could go to the supermarket and get anything you wanted." She smiled wryly. "We didn't do the freshman fifteen—we did the freshman fifty."

The kitchen opened onto a well-furnished living room with a breezy balcony. There was an aquarium with a slider turtle named Bob, and a shelf holding a snow-globe collection that Singletary started after moving in. There were racks of DVDs, which they had watched in their tent, on a battery-powered device. Singletary told me about the loneliness of that time. "We had lost a lot of friends," she said. "Billy wasn't home a lot, and I was afraid I was going to die alone out there—" Her voice caught, and her eyes welled up.

Singletary got her apartment through a supportive-housing nonprofit called Abode Services. It works across the East, South, and North Bay, financed by a mix of private philanthropy—contributions largely from Silicon Valley—and affordable-housing funds, and it's the biggest housing-services provider in the Bay Area. Abode's C.E.O., Louis Chicoine, started working there twenty-six years ago, when the organization ran an emergency shelter, and soon realized that he wanted to take another approach. His father was an early engineer at Sprint, and the tech industry gave him an idea.

"We looked to Cisco and Intel, which were struggling with having enough hotel rooms for venders," he told me. "They started master-leasing apartments." Abode decided to master-lease apartments, too, and put homeless people in them.

"What we found is, sure enough, if you give people a home and basic services to go along with it, they'll thrive, at very high rates," Chicoine said. "We were shocked." Ninety per cent of people maintained their housing for a year. When Abode transferred the leases to the tenants, steering them into the rental market, retention rates were even higher. "It's astonishing how many people, even in a real-estate market like the Bay Area's, actually *can* pick up the rent," he said.

Today, Abode starts with getting people an apartment—no hoop-jumping required—then helps them hold onto it by building up their incomes. Maybe that means dealing with addiction, addressing old warrants, or earning a degree. The organization is lavish with aid, with this goal in mind. By a year in, seventy-five per cent of the clients are paying their rent. Abode passes their subsidy on to someone else, creating a forward-moving machine, not a growing pool of aid. (It keeps paying for the permanently disabled.) Should residents lose a job, Abode floats them with a loan, so that they can stay housed until they find work. If they are expelled by landlords for disruptive behavior, Abode finds them another apartment.

"This can go on for three or four moves," Chicoine told me. "But we find that, at some point, the vast majority of people will start doing a cost-benefit analysis and get at the threshold of behavior they need to make it work."

This year, Abode will expand into San Francisco. Chicoine is apprehensive. "I have no illusions," he told me. Yet the approach might have better odds than anything else. It is democratic-egalitarian (open to anyone) and communitarian (balanced on personal connections). It is based on the simple idea that, if you do everything you can to keep people in homes they can be proud of, they will be not just housed on paper but integrated into middle-class life. Abode is working on nine hundred million dollars' worth of affordable-housing projects similar to buildings such as Singletary's, and Chicoine says that the model could work at twenty times its current size.

Singletary and Hunting gave me a tour of their building: the computer lab, the child-care center, the community patio shaded by redwoods. For the first few months after they moved in, Singletary said, she was depressed. "I thought, Why am I not happy?" Abode connected her with a therapist, who helped her realize that the shift from survival mode to secure mode was hard. When Hunting started drinking again, Abode helped him get sober.

As we were saying goodbye, on the sidewalk, a police S.U.V. swerved onto the curb, in front of a passing cyclist, and a cop sprang from the door.

"Billy!" Singletary screamed, and, in the space of a second, she grabbed her partner by the shoulder, yanking him behind her.

The officer wasn't there for them, though. He leaped and tackled the cyclist—a known drug dealer. When Singletary recovered, she and Hunting smoked for a while and watched as the man was cuffed. Then they put out their cigarettes, got their keys, and, just in time for dinner, went inside.

Farley Katz

"Remember when we were Instagram models?"

By late last year, Zach Hickson and his wife were back in a navigation center, this time on Division Circle. One day, he went to the pharmacy to pick up a prescription, and it came with a mysterious letter saying that they had been granted an S.R.O. "I don't know what happened," he told me. "But suddenly they decided we were worthy of housing."

Hickson now has his first locking door in San Francisco, on Sixth Street and Mission, just east of the city's main drag. By volunteering for twelve hours a month at Glide, he earns his rent, food stamps, and two hundred and seventy dollars in walking-around money. He hasn't had a drink in three years, and got off heroin after moving in. Life without the daily hustle felt almost too easy, he said, and he wasn't quite sure what to do with himself; he ended up working a bunch of extra hours. One afternoon, I met him at Glide, and we walked to his place. It was on one of those ecstatic San Francisco days when you can see Mount Diablo to the east and the Farallon Islands to the west, but the hallways of his building were fluorescent-lit. As he opened his door, roaches scurried across the floor. "I never had bugs when I was homeless," he told me.

The place was about as big as a college dorm room, and dominated by a bed with brown sheets and no pillowcases. There was a half-size refrigerator and dishes in the sink. "I still feel like I'm sleeping in an alley," Hickson said.

With resignation, he had requested that he and Aytim get separate S.R.O.s. "All through our relationship, she'd bounce for a while, go do her own thing, and then come back," he said. "I didn't want her to decide she was going to go and be homeless." The move proved prescient; not long after they were installed in housing, Aytim left their relationship—but stayed in her place. "I'm really not sure what to do without her," Hickson told me. "I went through a pretty hardcore state of depression the past couple of months, and I think that has a lot to do with why she left. She was also depressed."

They'd almost had a home together; now each had merely a home. A relationship is the smallest system, the tightest unit of community, and the two of them, like many in the city, had struggled with growth and ambition and collapsed under the strain. When Hickson spoke about Aytim now, it was with flickering duality—as someone just like him, then as someone in a different world. "She's a good person," he told me, with an air of heartbreak reimagined into pity. "But she was in a bad place." ♦

PROFILES

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE

Contrarianism has made Lionel Shriver famous, but fiction is what she believes changes minds.

BY ARIEL LEVY

In Lionel Shriver's novel "The Mandibles," it's 2029, the United States has defaulted on its loans, and the country is plunging into an economic abyss. Suddenly, a cabbage costs thirty-eight dollars. Savings accumulated over a lifetime evaporate in an hour. Former hedge-fund managers compete for jobs as waiters. (Their new patrons are foreigners; America, like other failed states, has become a magnet for tourists who can afford luxuries that the natives can only dream of.) Everyone is grimy, because water shortages have rendered showers brief and infrequent. This is made particularly troublesome by another post-apocalyptic issue: there's not enough toilet paper.

"I found that really gratifying," Shriver said, as she considered her prescience, one recent afternoon in London. Since the lockdown went into effect, she has been sequestered with her husband, Jeff Williams, at their row house in Bermondsey. It is a modest, comfortable place, decorated with thrift-store finds and small ceramic sculptures—smooth, faceless figures—that Shriver made, along with memorabilia that Williams has gathered in his decades as a jazz drummer. But Shriver was not feeling cozy. "Truth is, I've never been this shaken," she told me. She wasn't worried about getting sick. "The virus doesn't faze me," she said. She was afraid that she would prove oracular about more than toilet paper, and that we are hurtling toward global financial cataclysm—what she described in "The Mandibles" as "an ongoing, borderless nightmare ended only by death."

Reviewing the book for the *Times*, in 2016, Ruth Franklin called Shriver, who is originally from North Carolina, the "Cassandra of American letters," and reminded readers that "the curse of Cassandra, after all, was that she told the truth." Shriver has often been convinced that we are freaking out about the wrong things—focussing on climate change, for instance, instead of contemplating the population explosion that fuels it. The coronavirus, she believes, will ultimately prove less destructive than the international fiscal contraction that it has provoked. "There's reference in the media all the time now to 'monetizing the debt,' as if that's the most normal thing in the world. But there's no real difference between *monetizing* the debt and *defaulting* on it—it just takes longer," she said. "We're now in such an interconnected and complex financial world that we don't know what we're playing with." Shriver, who is sixty-three, thinks people are ridiculous for congratulating themselves on enduring quarantine, when the worst is yet to come. "This is not the bad part," she said. "This is the nothing part—as long as you're not one of the people who are gravely ill, or have lost someone who became gravely ill. Obviously, I wouldn't diminish that. Given that I would be characterized as a lockdown skeptic, one of the pitfalls of that role is to be cast as someone who thinks that the virus is trivial, and I wouldn't want to be stuck with that."

Regular readers of Shriver's column in *The Spectator*—the magazine that Boris Johnson edited before he became a politician—might be surprised to learn of that last concern. In April, Shriver wrote that even the shocking fatalities in Italy and Spain seemed not so distressing, compared with other dangers: "I shout at the TV: 'These numbers are ridiculously low!'" A month later, she added, "Covid deaths will barely register in the big picture even if their total multiplies by several times." She is unmoved by the possibility that the death tolls aren't higher because quarantine is working.

Instead of worrying about the virus, she argues, you should worry about your bank account—and your neighbor's, your employer's, and your country's. "There's going to be a rash of defaults across every single kind of loan," she predicted. "Car loans, houses, defaults on credit cards." Devastating inflation will follow, and finally money will be drained of value. If you want a tomato, you will have to trade something for it that is actually useful—like toilet paper. "I do not believe you can get away with conjuring value from nothing to an infinite degree," Shriver said. "We came so close to things just going completely to hell in 2008 that I don't think any of us who kept up even slightly during that period can pretend that that's not a possibility. And it scares the living shit out of me."

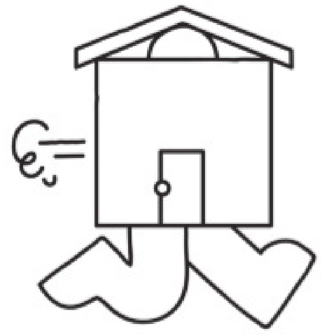
All of this might be keeping Shriver up at night, if it weren't for the fact that she doesn't sleep at night anyway. She usually goes to bed at about 5 A.M. Shriver is relentlessly contrarian, not only in her political positions—she is a pro-Brexit, anti-woke, #MeToo-skeptical Democrat—but in most aspects of life. She eats only one meal a day: dinner, usually around midnight, often featuring "burn your face off" quantities of chili pepper. She dislikes babies. Before moving to England, in 1999, she elected to live in Belfast for a dozen years during the Troubles. She and Williams leave London every summer, but not for the beach: they have a place in Windsor Terrace, Brooklyn, with no air-conditioning. She rarely uses the subway or taxis, preferring to ride a bicycle, no matter the distance, the weather, or the time of day. She is a woman with a man's name that she chose for herself at the age of fifteen. Shriver has always been constitutionally inclined toward defiance.

Fittingly, her novels tend to explore almost perversely unappealing issues. "Game Control" is about demography and AIDS, "Big Brother" about morbid obesity and filial duty. "So Much for That" (a National Book Award finalist) describes a slow death by cancer, made even more miserable by the failing American health-care system. In "We Need to Talk About Kevin," Shriver's

The novelist outside her home in Bermondsey, London. "My whole sensibility is pretty brutal," she says.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LEWIS KHAN

breakout hit, a mother comes to terms with her son's committing mass murder at school. (The book, which won the Orange Prize in 2005, is chillingly effective. I found myself keeping Shriver's hours when I read it, because I was too hooked to sleep.) "I tackle precisely the subjects that everyone yearns to avoid," Shriver has said. Her new novel, "The Motion of the Body Through Space," is notionally about fitness fanaticism, but it's really about physical decline and mortality: "One of the biggest transformations of aging was the way that healing grew horribly slow, as if your cells were reluctant to waste the energy of replacement on an organism en route to the scrap heap."



Shriver has a leathery imperviousness to conflict, which could be either the cause or the effect of her impulse to provoke. Last fall, back in the old world of congregating and speaking to people with uncovered faces, I met Shriver late one night at a crowded bar in Manhattan. She got into an argument about Brexit with an English acquaintance of mine, which culminated in actual screaming. He left outraged, and e-mailed me the next morning, still upset. When I asked Shriver if the dispute had bothered her, she had no memory of it. She is so accustomed to scrapping that it registers for her as little more than small talk.

If the coronavirus has made us all warier of our fellow-humans and more pessimistic about the future, then Shriver has spent a lifetime preparing for it. "I am a type. I don't like groups. I maintain few memberships," Shriver wrote in a recent column, titled "I Have Herd Immunity." "I'm leery of orthodoxy. I hold back from shared cultural enthusiasms. Everyone's met such obstreperous specimens—the original self-isolators."

Last month, in the Los Angeles *Times*, Shriver described her quarantine schedule: "Jeff and I arise at dawn, so we can sit out back and watch the sunrise. London is so much more peaceful when no one is doing anything unnecessarily productive in it." It was a time of intense focus, she reported. She was reading Proust; Williams was learning the sitar; they'd both decided to forgo alcohol until normal life resumed. Then she wrote, "I lied. We got up at noon. I read the *Telegraph*, the New York *Times* and *The Spectator*, then maniacally worked on my new manuscript, the only fiction I can stand to read. We watched the Channel 4 News, Newsnight, Sky News, PBS NewsHour and one more car-crash presidential press briefing on CNN. We killed a second bottle of wine. We made a fumbling stab at sex but Jeff was too drunk."

Shriver likes to describe her relationship with Williams by saying that they are both "divorced from the same woman." His first wife was Shriver's agent, and for years they had dinner together every summer. Then Williams and his wife split up, in 2000, and the tradition dissolved. A year later, Shriver gave her agent a draft of "We Need to Talk About Kevin." The agent was "horrified," Shriver said, believing that it was too dark to sell, and they parted ways soon afterward. (The novel was turned down by a dozen other agents and some thirty British publishers before it was bought by Serpent's Tail, for four figures. It has sold almost two million copies.)

Williams recalled a consequential reconnection the following summer: "I had a gig in New York, and Lionel came by herself, and we had our annual dinner. It went from there." First, though, Shriver had to extricate herself from a nine-year relationship, with an American journalist she'd lived with in Belfast. "Feeling really pulled in two different directions, between two completely different men—it's an embarrassment of riches, and also the worst thing that can ever happen to you," she told me. The experience inspired her next novel, "The Post-Birthday World," a book that is as comforting as "We Need to Talk About Kevin" is disturbing. "The Post-Birthday World" tracks two realities: one in which the protagonist, Irina, has a passionate affair with a snooker player (starting when they stumble into having dinner together on his birthday), and one in which Irina withstands temptation. Shriver renders her characters' emotions with exquisite specificity and empathy. Irina's irresolute yearning, in both scenarios, is agonizing and yet oddly reassuring. The message of the book is: It doesn't matter. Whatever decision you make will have its rewards and its costs, and you will sometimes be tormented by the alternative, because to be human is to doubt.

What's remarkable is that Shriver, who is at her most lyrical and compelling when contemplating her characters' ambivalence, is so inordinately assured of her positions on real-world issues that many of us find confounding. Immigration, for example. "I'm willing to admit that strict policies are potentially good for 'us' and bad for 'them,'" Shriver told me last fall, when she was at home in London, preparing dinner for some friends. "But the European sensibility is very uncomfortable with self-interest. You would never do something just because it's good *for you*—it has to be *good*. And I reject that!" She banged a pan of homemade cannelloni into the oven. (Shriver was a caterer before she was a writer.) "My whole sensibility is pretty brutal," she said. "I believe that it is the right of countries to decide that, even though all these people want to come to your country and work in nail salons and send a bunch of money home, that doesn't mean you necessarily let them in." That day, the London papers had led with the story of thirty-nine Vietnamese people who died trying to sneak into England in a refrigerated container truck. "The coverage has been incredibly sentimental," Shriver continued, as Williams, a lanky man of sixty-nine, poured wine. "I mean, I'm sorry for their sake that they are dead, but insofar as it instigates yet another conversation about immigration—'Well, it's our fault, because we don't let people come in by regular channels, so they're *forced* to come in the freezer containers'—if you advance that argument, you let everybody in, and then the country they're coming *for* no longer exists." She had argued strenuously for Brexit in her columns and on numerous television programs and podcasts. She was unable to vote for it, however, because she is not a British citizen: she is an immigrant.

Shriver had her hair up in a clip, and she was wearing a red dress under a black overcoat, which she did not take off all night. Williams had on a flannel shirt under a heavy wool cardigan. It was unbelievably cold in their house, because Shriver refuses to turn the heat on unless the alternative is genuinely dangerous. She has shared this quirk with several of her characters: in "The Mandibles," her protagonists are too apocalyptically broke to warm up the house; in "The Post-Birthday World," Irina's imperious Russian mother keeps her apartment in Brighton Beach so chilly that Irina has to wear gloves. Irina—like Shriver—suffers from Raynaud's syndrome, a circulatory condition that causes painful sensitivity to cold. Shriver eschews heat partly for pragmatic reasons: "I'm cheap!" But she is also fascinated by testing her own toughness.

Like the characters in her new novel, Shriver is a lifelong fitness fanatic: trim and muscular and bristling with strength. "I don't have to use it," she said. "You just like knowing you've got it in reserve." In her thirties, she sometimes fasted for three weeks at a time. She is proud of facing even the worst things in life with fortitude. In a column around the time of Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearings, she wrote, "I have my own sexual abuse story, and it's way worse than Christine Ford's. . . . What happened to me does not haunt my adulthood unduly, does not explain all my problems, and did not result in a host of ineradicable neuroses. I don't mean that others who still battle demons as a consequence of sexual trauma simply need to suck it up. I mean only to establish that moving on is possible, and to suggest that we start celebrating resilience as well as baring our scars."

The bell rang, and, as Williams went to answer the door, Shriver whispered conspiratorially, "Our guests are Remainers." Her own sentiments about Brexit began with political pique ("The EU is a bloated bureaucracy packed with pampered timeservers," she wrote in *Harper's*) and escalated to moral outrage ("If unintended consequences were grounds for invalidating a vote, we'd have to nullify most elections, or simply stop bothering to hold them"). But the topic was carefully avoided until about 1 A.M., when everyone was a little drunk, and digging into Shriver's apple-raspberry pie. By that point, she was in no mood to argue about the deficiencies of the European Union. She was in her other mode: entertaining, self-deprecating, training her relentlessness on a good time instead of on a good point. "Sometimes I wonder: Why do I give a shit?" Shriver asked merrily from the head of the table, puffing on an e-cigarette that resembled a tiny blowtorch. "I think I have an addictive personality, and it doesn't just extend to drinking a little too much red wine. It's also a narrative addiction. I do think there is a principle involved with Brexit, but it's not going to make any big economic difference one way or the other, and everything will plod along in either case! So why do I care so much? I can't quite answer it, aside from the fact that these stories have a momentum. And, once you have aligned yourself with one side or the other, then it's like a sport."

Shriver's highest-profile moments in the past few years have been as an ideological competitor. Depending on your point of view, the stakes of the game were either profound insensitivity to racial and cultural traumas or a hat and a mailbox, respectively. In the first instance, Shriver gave a keynote address at the 2016 Brisbane Writers Festival, in which she argued against the concept of cultural appropriation. She briefly donned a sombrero, in solidarity with students at Bowdoin College who had been censured for hosting a tequila party at which revellers wore the hats. "The moral of the sombrero scandals is clear: You're not supposed to try on other people's hats," Shriver said, and cautioned, "The ultimate end point of keeping our mitts off experience that doesn't belong to us is that there is no fiction." People walked out in protest. A piece in the *Guardian* said that the speech "drips of racial supremacy." The festival disavowed Shriver and her perspective. Two weeks later, Francine Prose wrote, in *The New York Review of Books*, "Shriver takes a familiar tack often used on Fox News: trivializing valid concerns by ridiculing their most absurd manifestations." She added, "It's worth noting that Shriver's own visibility has greatly increased in the aftermath of her Brisbane lecture."

More recently, Shriver appeared on the popular British talk show "Question Time," and told a live audience that she didn't understand what the big deal was about Boris Johnson writing, in the *Telegraph*, that women in burqas

"That's all well and good, but do we have enough non-perishables?"

look like mailboxes. "Why is that so insulting?" Shriver asked. The audience booed, and a woman in a hijab shouted, "I'm *from* here! From that rhetoric I get told to get back to my own country! Take responsibility!"

"Did you read the original op-ed?" Shriver asked, and the woman rolled her eyes, disgusted. (The piece, which Johnson wrote before he became Prime Minister, was introduced with the line "Yes, the burka is oppressive and ridiculous—but that's still no reason to ban it.") When the interaction began, Shriver had seemed to be barely containing a smirk, but now her tone shifted to pleading: "He was standing up for Muslim women's right to wear whatever they want!"

A week later, she wrote to me, "I have managed to get myself into trouble again," adding that she'd appeared on the program "against my better judgment—and I have to say that my better judgment doesn't get a lot of exercise these days." After a clip of the spat went viral, an old friend of Shriver's ended their relationship. "All over a difference of opinion about whether 'letter box' has pejorative qualities. For pity's sake, one could as well be vilified for saying, 'You look like a chair.'"

Shriver argues that her detractors engage in "malicious misinterpretation," hunting for the worst—the most racist, sexist, homophobic—possible reading of whatever they encounter. In one column, for example, Shriver expressed distaste for a Penguin Random House plan to make its authors and staff members reflect the U.K.'s demographic breakdown by "ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social mobility and disability." She was accused of being a literary white supremacist, and she responded indignantly. "In a polarised and broadly illiterate digital universe, full of predators gorging on animosity who are determined to read whatever they wish to, words cease to function," she wrote. "All nuance out the window, the language no longer serves to communicate, and what we writers do for a living is worse than pointless."

Sure. But it is hard to believe that Shriver wasn't spoiling for a fight when she predicted that soon, even if a book is "incoherent, tedious, meandering and insensible," it will matter less than the identity of the writer: "If an agent submits a manuscript written by a gay transgender Caribbean who dropped out of school at seven and powers around town on a mobility scooter, it will be published."

Last November, during a talk at the Oxford Union, Shriver was asked about the difference between writing fiction and columns. "Fiction is much more subtle," she replied. "It's more evasive, it's more circuitous, it should be a little harder to discern what the message is—not that it shouldn't have a message, but that message is usually complex and sometimes contradictory." Asked which was more likely to change people's minds, she answered immediately, "Fiction."

But, as the cultural status of novelists has declined, the power of the provocateur, the Twitter warrior, and the political combatant has risen. Shriver is perpetually in demand as a commentator for the other side—of pretty much any issue. Ultimately, she prefers fiction to fighting: her new novel is her fourteenth. For Shriver, the problem with being both a pugilist and a novelist is that the first role tends to overshadow the second.

"All this stuff you're doing is a distraction from writing another novel, which you're intent on, man," Williams said, once their Remainer guests had gone home. It was quite late, jazz was sliding out of the speakers, and the air was so cloudy with nicotine vapor it was almost like being in a tiny, extremely cold club. (After years of playing with such jazz greats as Stan Getz and Dizzy Gillespie, Williams peppers his speech with words like "dig" and "cats" and "vibe." Shriver lent his lexicon—and his vocation—to the title character in "Big Brother," who defends it by saying, "Every profession got its patois.")

Shriver had been asked to compile a book of her columns, and she was torn about whether to proceed. "You can't write fiction if you spend the next year and a half on that!" Williams continued. "Between your appearances and the new book coming out? These are processes, man, you know what I mean?" Williams argued that someone else ought to go through Shriver's nonfiction to cull the best work. "If it's me, O.K."

"It just takes so long to reread this shit," Shriver said. "You don't really want to do that. You'd find it degrading."

"It's not that I don't *want* to—I have my own commitments," he said. "Then I'm saying you're more important than I am."

"See?" Shriver said, laughing. "Case closed."

"Which you probably are," Williams said, puffing on his e-cigarette. "In fact, you definitely are."

Williams told me that, during the years when he and Shriver were friends, he'd never thought about their becoming a couple. "I didn't think I was good enough for her," he said. "She was so intelligent—oh, my God! But it turned out that we were actually a perfect match." Shriver's new novel is dedicated to Williams, with the note "Added together and divided by two, we make a perfectly balanced person." Asked if they disagreed much about politics, Williams replied, "Not fundamentally. She's a little more extreme than I am. I'm more of a diplomat type—I can see both sides. Sometimes we argue about that."

Growing up in Raleigh, North Carolina, Shriver was known as Margaret Ann, and not known as a troublemaker. She remembers being raised in a "real top-down family—a nineteen-fifties family in the nineteen-sixties." Her mother, Peggy, stayed home with the kids when they were young, and her father, Donald, was a Presbyterian minister and an academic. Though he was politically progressive—active in the antiwar and civil-rights movements—Shriver describes him as a "natural autocrat."

From early on, Shriver's older brother, Gregory, who had a genius I.Q. and a larger-than-life charisma, was engaged in a power struggle with their parents. It culminated in his dropping out of school and leaving home when he was fourteen, to live with two women with whom he'd become involved. "He was the one who stood up to my parents—he stood up to *everyone*," Shriver told me. "I really admired him. He didn't do what he was told. And I guess I've been copying him ever since."

"There was a kind of mythology that my parents built up around him," Shriver's younger brother, Tim, a peach farmer in Iowa, told me. "They had a favorite phrase, that Gregory was 'too smart for his own good'—which is kind of a weird construction. Lionel and I did not act up, and it could sometimes feel like by behaving well we were not as smart as he was." On the British radio program

INTIMACIES, RECEIVED

Having you was like having a baby.
A box of matches carrying bees across a lake.

I keep the reel of your passport photo
in my coat pocket, bent around a coin.

There were many nights when you threatened to run away.
If falling in love is a decision

I listened for the click in your breath.
You aren't old enough to know yet

few people have your best interest
at heart. At heart, I swept the wet glass

of you throwing pills across the street.
When you were sick, I wrote your weight

in kilograms so you wouldn't understand
what was happening.

—*Taneum Bambrick*

"My Teenage Diary," Shriver read from a journal entry she'd written at age twelve, describing her resentment at being eclipsed by her older brother. "Everywhere I go: 'Are you Gregory's sister?'" she wrote. She wanted to be known as herself—or, rather, as Tony Shriver, one of many pseudonyms she tried on. "I was already drawn to a male nomenclature," she said, "inclined toward a masculine identity." It was only logical, she suggested: "I grew up between two brothers. And it was very clear to me in my family that my father had the better deal."

Her given name, Margaret Ann, represented everything that she despised about being a girl. "From childhood, I experienced being female as an imposition," Shriver wrote, in a piece called "Gender—Good for Nothing." "Periods were hideous. Did my brothers get puffy once a month, suffer terrible back aches and go back to wearing smelly de facto diapers? I was the one, too, who had the fear of God put in her about getting pregnant. In comparison to their sons, my parents clearly had reduced expectations for my career prospects. Ruefully, at eighty-seven, my father finally conceded last year: 'You know, we may have underestimated you.' He still hasn't quite brought himself to admit why: I was the girl."

The family moved to Atlanta when Shriver was fifteen, and she entered her new high school as Lionel. "I just liked the sound of it," she said. "It was kind of arbitrary and out of the air." (Shriver seems to employ a similar strategy for naming her characters: Serenata Terpsichore, Nollie Mandible, Goog Stackhouse, Mordecai McCrea.) Donald Shriver, who is now ninety-two, believes that his daughter was making a career move. She had announced her decision to become a writer when she was seven. "I think she chose a first name that might give readers some question as to whether she was a man or a woman," he told me.

After high school, Shriver attended Emory University for a year, and then transferred to Barnard, in New York. Her parents had recently moved to the city, when Donald was hired as the president of Union Theological Seminary. The Shrivers still live on the Upper West Side, in a big, crowded apartment near the Hudson. When I went to see them, last spring, a photograph of Lionel at twenty-five sat on a table: she had the same intense, assured, faintly smug look that she has in many of her author photos, but the effect is different on a very young woman. ("The thing about being that age," Shriver told me, "you're just so . . . penetrable.")

Donald sat in a leather chair. Peggy, who suffered a stroke a few years ago, sat next to him, silently holding his hand. "Peggy and I met in a church organization, so we have a great debt to them; we'll be married sixty-seven years on August the ninth," Donald said, and his wife gave a little smile. "She's from the Midwest, and one of the trials of moving from Iowa to Virginia was having to adjust to Southern race relations. I marched in Selma with Martin Luther King, and I was grateful for that, because it gave me a touch of what the movement was about. My father and I had big conflicts over the civil-rights movement. I'm sure Lionel is conscious of that. The fact that I marched for voting rights—I could've lost my job as a university pastor."

Shriver and her siblings turned away from the church; like the rest of their cohort, they were challenging orthodoxies. On a more personal level, they felt that the humility their father preached was at odds with his true nature: ambitious, individualistic, and self-regarding. Shriver told me, "I grew up in a household that believed it was just mind-blowingly altruistic. And that's a formula for being cynical about altruism."

In one of her early novels, "Game Control," an American do-gooder goes to Kenya to promote family planning among the poor. She falls in love with a misanthropic demographer, who chides her: "Your dowdy sympathy is not helping them, and it is certainly not helping you." (The character was informed by the photographer Peter Beard, whom Shriver got to know during a year she spent in Nairobi. In her thirties, she thought that she'd move from country to country, exploring settings for her novels—looking for cultures to appropriate, as it were. But when she got to Belfast she didn't want to leave.) In some ways, the demographer is Shriver's proxy: only too eager to scandalize earnest colleagues with his hard-heartedness. "Why are we still trying to reduce infant mortality?" he asks at a conference. "We keep more children alive to starve and suffer." Shriver told me, "The trouble with fake altruism is that it doesn't necessarily do good, because it's designed to draw attention to the do-gooder. I

A SCAM THAT TARGETS BABIES
PEEKABOO!
BEK

don't think I believe in the possibility of real altruism."

She contemplated charity, self-interest, and resentment in her novel "A Perfectly Good Family," about a young woman from the South who moves to London to become an artist, then returns home to settle affairs with her two brothers after her parents die. Their late father was a grandiose civil-rights lawyer who was overly proud of his progressiveness. "My brothers may have resented their father's staking claim to the big liberal issues not just because these were used to bludgeon the boys into submission, but because so little largesse was left for them," the protagonist says. Their mother is also judged insufficiently authentic. "If the stagy fakery that invaded my mother's behaviour had been restricted to her 'telephone voice,'" Shriver wrote, "and that fossilized smile for strangers, I could have forgiven her as a socially formal woman covering for the fact that she was shy. But it was in private she was at her most false."

Shriver dedicated the book to her parents. When they read it, they were furious. "I was threatened with basically being ejected from the family," Shriver said. The portraits were both unmistakable and unflattering; along with the insincere parents, the younger brother is fastidious and tightly wound. "There was plenty to be upset about, and it was perplexing to us sometimes why she didn't understand that," Tim told me. He conceded that her depiction of their mother was dead-on: "She had a formal way of speaking, and you hungered for something to come out off the cuff, straight out of her gut."

The only family member who liked the book was Gregory. The older brother in the novel, Mordecai, is wily, selfish, self-made, and self-destructive—a magnetic figure who, after years of hard drinking, gets in a motorcycle accident and ends up in a wheelchair, cared for by his siblings. Shriver's novel proved prophetic: Gregory, too, drank heavily, and years after it was published he got T-boned on his moped and became reliant on painkillers. "That's when he started eating too much," Shriver said. He became obese and dependent on his parents, in a way that he'd rejected as a fourteen-year-old. He died of heart failure at the age of fifty-five.

On the radio, Shriver read a letter that she'd written to her younger self: "Gregory will cease to overshadow you. At length, you will overshadow him to a degree that makes you embarrassed, until you yearn to give him some of your spare limelight to illuminate his cheerless evenings." She wrote about their relationship in "Big Brother," which hovers around an investigation of duty. When the protagonist, Pandora, goes to pick up her sibling at the airport, he has grown so large that she does not recognize him. "Looking at that man was like falling into a hole," Shriver writes, "and I had to look away because it was rude to stare, and even ruder to cry." This helpless agony suffuses the book, as Pandora nearly destroys her marriage trying to save her brother from himself.

"She's not a devotee of happy endings," Donald Shriver told me. "Sometimes I think her skepticism is too deep. I wish she'd write about some people where you could say at the end, 'I think she truly admired those characters.'"

One night in October, an m.c. stood onstage at Central Hall Westminster and recounted the building's history. The U.N. General Assembly first sat there. Past speakers had included Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Winston Churchill—all of whom, the host said, were "fitting warmup acts for tonight."

Shriver walked onstage with a jaunty, jockish swagger, accompanied by Douglas Murray, the author of "The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity." The house was sold out, some two thousand seats filled with people eager for some live iconoclasm. "We're here to talk about identity politics," Shriver said. "If you know anything about our work, you know we're here to talk about what's wrong with it."

"Or leave now," Murray said, and got a big laugh.

Shriver inherited some of her father's gift for leading the faithful down familiar ideological pathways. She described a culture engaged in an Olympics of victimhood—"categories of people who are implicitly pitted against each other for your sympathy"—and the crowd broke into applause. "It is not about becoming powerful. It's about seeing your powerlessness as your power," she went on. "We are encouraging people to embrace their own fragility and their own difficulties as the source of their very identity."

Murray said, "I don't disagree," and Shriver replied, "I don't imagine we're going to disagree on anything."

They had a friendly exchange about activism. "The worst thing that can happen to any liberation movement is getting what it wants," Shriver said.

"There was a time when gay-rights groups, civil-rights groups in America, and so on, had a point," Murray, who is gay, added. "Now what is the point of these entities?"

But then Murray suggested that the real agenda behind identity politics is the overthrow of capitalism. "They're using trans as a battering ram," he posited, with the goal of "smuggling in Marxism."

Shriver looked pained—triggered, you might say. "The way you keep talking about 'they,' I don't know who you're talking about," she said. The audience laughed, but she wasn't joking. Here, among her most devoted fans, Shriver found the only conceivable way to be contrary: she defended her antagonists. "Most of the people who have got caught up in this way of thinking, they're not malign," she said. "They're responding to a natural human need for purpose, for meaning, and even for justice." For a moment, Shriver the novelist, the lover of complexity, emerged. The people on the other side of the argument suggest that you come "pre-made," she said. "And that is not my experience of being a person. My experience—and I don't want to go too New Age on you—but it is a continual act of becoming, of creation. If nothing else, you continually have to be another day older. . . . To instead focus on the things that are never going to change—from the day that you are born—is like locking yourself in a room."

Windsor Terrace, on the southern edge of Brooklyn's Prospect Park, is so verdant and leafy in August that it feels almost bucolic. One night, Shriver and Williams sat on their front porch with the door and all the windows open, hanging out with Tony Sarowitz, Shriver's best friend. Sarowitz, who has longish, grayish hair and lives part time in Woodstock, recently completed a science-fiction novel and writes financial copy as a day job. He and Shriver met in the seventies, as students in Columbia's M.F.A. program. "It's the main thing I got out of it," Shriver said. "Which, I have to say, is a lot. They have yet to invite me to teach there, by the way. I hate teaching creative writing, but . . ."

"It's a little odd that they haven't asked you," Sarowitz finished for her.

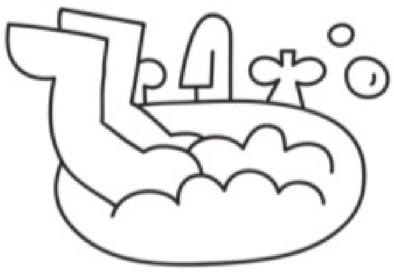
"I get the best of both worlds," Shriver said. "I don't have to teach creative writing, *and* I can be resentful!"

Shriver and Sarowitz play tennis three times a week during the summer—one of the main reasons that she comes to Brooklyn. (They don't keep score; they're too competitive to handle losing.) Shriver's knees have been giving her trouble, though, and she is terrified of having surgery, because she won't be able to exercise during the recovery period. "My father's been saying, for the last ten years, he's a little bit worried he's not going to be able to play tennis anymore," Shriver said. "That just pains me. I am genuinely sympathetic with the travails of being ninety-two years old." (In "The Motion of the Body Through Space," Shriver writes, "How much kinder it would have been, to turn off, like an appliance. The gradual, drawn-out corruption of the body while its host was still trapped inside was a torture of a sort they would have contrived at Guantanamo, or Bergen-Belsen. Every old age was an Edgar Allan Poe story.")

"You're going to be the same way, man," Williams said.

"Except you'll still be playing," Sarowitz added. "You'll have a stroke. You'll lose an arm, but you'll still be playing."

As the men talked about music and books, Shriver watched them and puffed on her blowtorch. She has known Sarowitz since they were young, but she met Williams when they were well into middle age. "I missed the absolute prime, which I feel annoyed by," she told me. "When you really know someone, you keep in your perception who they have been, and you're able to see them in a fuller sense, but that also means a blurring of the present. I like concentrating sometimes on Jeff's younger visage." She exhaled vapor. "Fucking good-looking guy," she said, in a tone that you don't often hear women use to talk about their husbands: more wolf whistle than reminiscence.



Williams brought her back into the conversation. "You resent being a woman," he said.

"I *hate* being a woman," Shriver corrected. "What's to like?"

"But you get to enjoy it for a few extra years," Sarowitz said.

Much of Shriver's value system revolves around tough-mindedness. Stop borrowing money you can't pay back—and stop lending it, too, while you're at it. Don't dwell on your traumas, recover from them. Rejoice in your power, not in your oppression, and never, ever start a sentence with "As a . . ." Shriver has changed her name, her country, her accent, her religious affiliation, and the definition of "female" that she was raised to embody, in order to become a self-created, self-interested oddity, distinct from the mores of literary society. But you can't outwit everything. The body inevitably gets the last word, forcing us all to accept an identity that there's no escaping: mortal.

I FaceTimed with Shriver on a chilly morning in May, the day after she finished the first draft of a new novel. It's about a couple who decide in middle age that they'll kill themselves when they turn eighty; they'll have a quick, clean death, skip all the suffering, turn off like appliances. Shriver was in no mood to celebrate its completion. "One of the gross things about the tranquillity and the comparative silence outside the window is that, at the same time, horrible things are happening, and we can't hear them," she told me, sitting in her red-walled study, wearing a thick, black faux-shearling jacket against the cold. "If failing businesses happened in a physical realm, like a building falling down, then it would be deafening out there. And we're not just talking about greedy fat cats. It's regular people who are losing their jobs."

Long before the pandemic, I had asked Shriver if she felt that it was her job as a columnist to propose antidotes to the world's ills. "Solutions are no fun," she replied. "Problems are really fun and apocalyptic, and they have a kind of gorgeousness—there's a wallowing there in the awfulness. These prissy little solutions don't get me going." This problem, though, was not so gorgeous. For the moment, she didn't even want to fight about it.

"I would love to be wrong—it would be wonderful," Shriver said. "We can talk a year or two from now and you can make fun of me." She gave a half smile. "We can get together in fancy restaurants and talk about how stupid I am. That would be brilliant." ♦

DAVID MEANS

TWO NURSES, SMOKING

PHOTOGRAPH BY LEWIS KHAN

FROM A WIDE VANTAGE

Two hospital workers, somewhat lonely-looking figures, taking a smoke break, back behind a trailer, leaning toward each other as they talked softly beside a row of neatly trimmed bushes. One had long hair and thin, pale arms that dangled from her scrubs. The other was big, burly, with a tattoo on his arm. Even that day in June—if you paid close attention, driving past—you might've seen desire in the way she pointed her toe and dug it into the dusty concrete while she listened to him, or you might've noticed the way he swayed as he talked, because he liked to riff on the subject at hand, and, lately, the last few times, when she visited with the trailer, he had expounded upon the recent news: a serial-killer nurse who had confessed to murdering, somewhere in Pennsylvania, at least a dozen patients. She, for her part, added a little commentary here and there, because it was a shared story that somehow seemed to make the job a bit easier, the kind of bullshit story that you'd tell to kill time, and she liked his deep, no-nonsense tone, which, she thought, might've come from his stint in the Army. He had green eyes that became deeply serious when he was listening.

THE BOND

Began to form in the way they both moved during the breaks—in the solitude they sought between the bushes and the long flank of the trailer, a dirty sliver of parking-lot curb where cigarette butts and litter had blown up. Between them was a secretive energy, a conspiracy formed out of a mutual history. (Or maybe the conspiracy formed a sense of mutual history. Maybe it wasn't so simple.) As a kid she had lived in one of those motels, Holiday Court, that had turned itself over to long-term renters—folks who paid by the week but did so year in and year out when they could, building an easy camaraderie, fighting in the parking lot, spilling blood, bringing the police—the daughter of a fuckup mom with zero parenting skills. A kind, encouraging counsellor at her high school named Mrs. Hargrove, who gave her hope, urged her to take a heroic leap to community college, and then nursing school on a scholarship. He'd grown up in Nevada near a town called Ely, on the Shoshone reservation, without a father, spending a lot of his time alone in the countryside, staying out of his mom's way, and then, suddenly, they'd moved East to a trashy apartment in Newburgh, New York, with a new dad who liked to drink as much as his mother did.

THE KIDNEY POUNDER

As she liked to call it, was inside the trailer. Technically, the pounder's called a lithotripsy machine, she said, and it delivers extracorporeal shock waves and breaks up the stones. Around the metropolitan area, and sometimes in upstate New York, she followed the trailer to cut-rate hospitals, assisting whatever doctor had been assigned to it by putting the patients onto the platform, adjusting the Velcro straps, giving her spiel about how this would hurt but not as much as passing a big stone—if it even passed—and then she'd work the device, pushing as gently as possible while the pulsing waves of ultrasonic energy broke the stone apart.

A MALE PATIENT

Would come into the trailer, bitching and moaning, and use the occasion to touch her knee. A woman would come in, gaunt and frail, barely able to walk, resisting all help, clambering onto the platform, brushing away her offered hand.

ALL PAIN

Seemed to be equalized as she worked the machine, pressing the device, hitting the stone hard with ultrasonic energy, until personality and differences seemed to her to be fused into a single point.

THE SCAR

That ran down his neck—just missing his carotid artery, she noticed—and disappeared beneath his scrubs gave, when she asked him about it, an excuse to talk about the war, the time an I.E.D. hit his Hummer, blowing a tire off the vehicle, sending shrapnel through the undercarriage and into his buddy's arm. Bleeding bad, his friend screamed that he was dying, that his arm was shredded meat. But the dude's arm was perfectly fine in the end and it was only the fog-of-war shit. I guess I'm gonna live, his buddy said when he finally realized that his arm was still there, I guess I'm O.K., Chief.

KIDNEY BOY

Was this kid, barely twenty, a junkie from the looks of it, suffering for a couple of weeks while the trailer was way up North in a place called Watertown, licking a morphine lollipop, with a big stone and a tight ureter, meaning, like, the worst-case scenario: he's not only going to be pounded but it's going to take a couple of sessions and the fragments are going to pass one at a time, and then a ureteral stent will be put in, too. The kid had this crooked jaw from a bad rewire, and when I unstrapped him he kissed me and said I saved his life, said it like he meant it, and I tried not to let him see it in my eyes—you know, the things I was seeing about his future—she told Marlon one day. He leaned forward and listened to her without a word.

DURING

Most of these breaks, the air-conditioner in the trailer would pop on, devouring the sounds: the tink of a ball hitting the backstop at the schoolyard across the street, the skittering of litter in the parking lot, sirens and the deep-blue buzz of the hospital itself. When it went off, the summer would reappear, the chirping of birds and the shush of cars on the road beyond the decorative bushes.

KIDNEY BOY

Said I'm not going to make it, and she assured him that he would but heard the truth in his voice and saw it in his eyes. You know how that is, she said. He was seeing what I saw but couldn't tell him.

NOTHING GOOD

Could come from the intimacy of those post-treatment moments, when a patient was disoriented by a joyous sensation of relief, he thought. That was when they did weird shit, reaching out to touch you, saying something about putting you in their will, or even, in some cases, lashing out for no good reason, because you were a bearer of good tidings.

HE RESISTED

Giving her the standard nurse-to-nurse talk about not internalizing the pain of the patients, how they come and go fleetingly. The ones you think are going to live end up dead. The ones you're sure are going to die, who have death in their eyes, end up living, processed out and sent on their merry way. Changing bedpans and lifting armrests and holding shoulders, checking charts, slipping little baggies over the tips of thermometers, inserting I.V. needles. Then the sensation of going outside for a break and seeing that, although inside a patient has just grunted and gone into cardiac arrest with a no-assist order, the sky, filled with clouds and sunlight and birds, is still throwing itself majestically over the world.

SHE CRIED

About Kidney Boy, and he drew her close, giving her a chance to glance down, through the blue light of his shirt, at a switchyard of ridges where the scar opened up into the crater where the frag had gone in.

THE TRAILER

Arrived every few weeks that summer, and they texted each other and met.

ITINERANT LIFE

Following the trailer from one town to the next, staying in budget hotels, watching television alone in the evenings, didn't bother her much, because before Holiday Court she and her mother had travelled around a lot, following one asshole after another, and she got used to it, she said one afternoon, brushing her hair away from her forehead and looking out over the bushes to the kids playing on the ball field across the street and then, turning around quickly, gazing over his shoulder at the hill that climbed past the road in the other direction, across the parking lot, where tombstones rose up into the trees. It seemed pretty typical, putting a graveyard next to a hospital.

THE DEAD

Had names that stuck in the mind, whereas those of the ones who were cured were released, sent back into the clean, raw rotation of the stars, so to speak, he said. There was always some patient in critical condition, doomed and marked terminal on the charts, who overcame the odds and marched out of the ward surrounded by his family, not even waving goodbye, taking a name off into the future.

MARLON

Liked her white arms, and the way her breasts swayed beneath the fabric of her scrubs, and he thought—when she and the trailer were gone—about the way her ass shifted when she walked, throwing a compaction from one side to the other, revealing to him a complication of form that begged to be touched, giving him, during lonely nights in his shitty apartment, something to imagine: falling to his knees and extending his arms out like one of those mythic figures offering a baby to the sun or to God, gently cradling each side of her beautiful bottom.

GRACIE

Admired the bulk of his body and his dark skin and his muscular heft in combination with the way he shifted from foot to foot when he was standing and the way, when he was on the curb smoking, he looked beyond her to some point on the horizon that nobody could see, pulling his long black hair tighter into the regulation ponytail, holding his head high and working his jaw as he talked, letting his upstate intonations enter his voice, and the way he assumed a weird, regal formality, stopping to bow to her as he emerged from the emergency-room doors, sweeping his arm out to the side, looking grim and lonely until he unleashed his smile in a way that seemed vulnerable and tough all at the same time.

SHOSHONE

Folk loved the wolf, he told her one afternoon when she asked him about life in Ely, Nevada. Wolf could bring people back to life but he didn't do it, because there'd be too many people in the world if he did. I'm not sure how the story goes, but it's something like that, he said, and it was about the only thing my mother ever really told me about our people.

HALF-HOUR

Breaks adding up, one after another, over four months.

THE LONELIEST ROAD

In America is Route 50 in Nevada, and it goes through Ely. Driving it's like losing your soul and getting another one, my mom used to say. My father drove out 50 and disappeared for a year and came back saying that he'd never got off it—the road, I mean—and then she left him, or he left her, or they left each other. I've got fifty versions of that story. Another thing she told me was that folks in San Francisco said they had to drive east to get to the West. She had this hangup about being from the West, and then there she was, living in Newburgh, New York.

RIFFING

About the serial-killer nurse, expounding on something he'd read online about this male nurse who admitted to killing patients, mostly in Pennsylvania, adjusting morphine drips and rewriting charts, covering his tracks. By that point she had given him the entire Kidney Boy story, how she'd seen in his eyes that he would commit suicide, even the fact that he'd throw himself from a bridge. A few days later, he told one about his buddy who was killed in Iraq. Same old story, I.E.D., blasting up through the undercarriage, tearing a hole and all of that, except this time it wasn't his arm but his head and upper torso, and the light went out of his eyes.

PLAY IT OUT

She was saying. He was hunching his shoulders, his face buried in his hands. The way I see it, that serial-killer nurse isn't a real killer; he can take or leave the death part, because what he really likes is scoping out the possibilities—you know the ones I'm talking about, the pre-op patients who want you to lend an ear so they can decide that you're gonna be a good-luck charm, taking your hand and complimenting your nursing skills, understanding full well the implications of the coming surgery, whatever. You go in and for a minute, even if you try not to, you feel the life *in your hand* and you become aware that one little fuckup on a chart, or a misreading, and the patient could die. Or when you go in to find balloons and cards tacked to a board and see some little kid—always named Sammy or Annie—with a shaved head and pre-surgery marks and you think, against your will, how fucking easy it would be to save the kid from suffering, he said, looking out over the road, streaming his smoke between his teeth, with his eyes on the horizon and his chin jutting.

ON THE STEPS

Of the trailer a few days later, picking up on the subject of the serial-killer nurse, he began to talk again about the impulse to kill, how he'd learned in Fallujah that impulse equals mess, and how there was a guy in the unit who plugged shots whenever he saw fit, and one day some old lady came around the corner with her hand in the air—we hated corners, he said, which was one reason we hated Fallujah—and this guy in our unit just popped her. When we got close to the body, we saw that she had these arthritic hands, fingers curled, so a hand held up like that might've looked like a gun. But it was really just sloppy shit, the truth.

BEAUTIFUL

Inside that moment—his voice quivering, his eyes welling—the wind was rising and the darker clouds were coming in. His eyes were painfully green as the grief twisted his face and the trees near the road gave off a sugary odor and tenderness formed in the quiet. How long was that moment, held in memory between the two of them for the rest of their lives?

FINALLY

He spoke and said, My grandmother had rheumatoid arthritis, and I used to go with her to Ely, to this clinic where she put her hands into a wax bath while I watched, dipping them in and wincing, at first, until she had blue wax gloves. Then he shook a cigarette from his pack and lit up, and they sat and listened to the sounds of summer, looking over the bushes at the baseball diamond and, beyond it, at the top of the school and the white cupola in the sky. When he spoke again, he explained that the dead lady on the street in Fallujah had had hands just like his grandmother's, and then he began to cry, starting with a single, low gasp and a collapse of his shoulders as he buried his face, and she pulled him close.

ONE

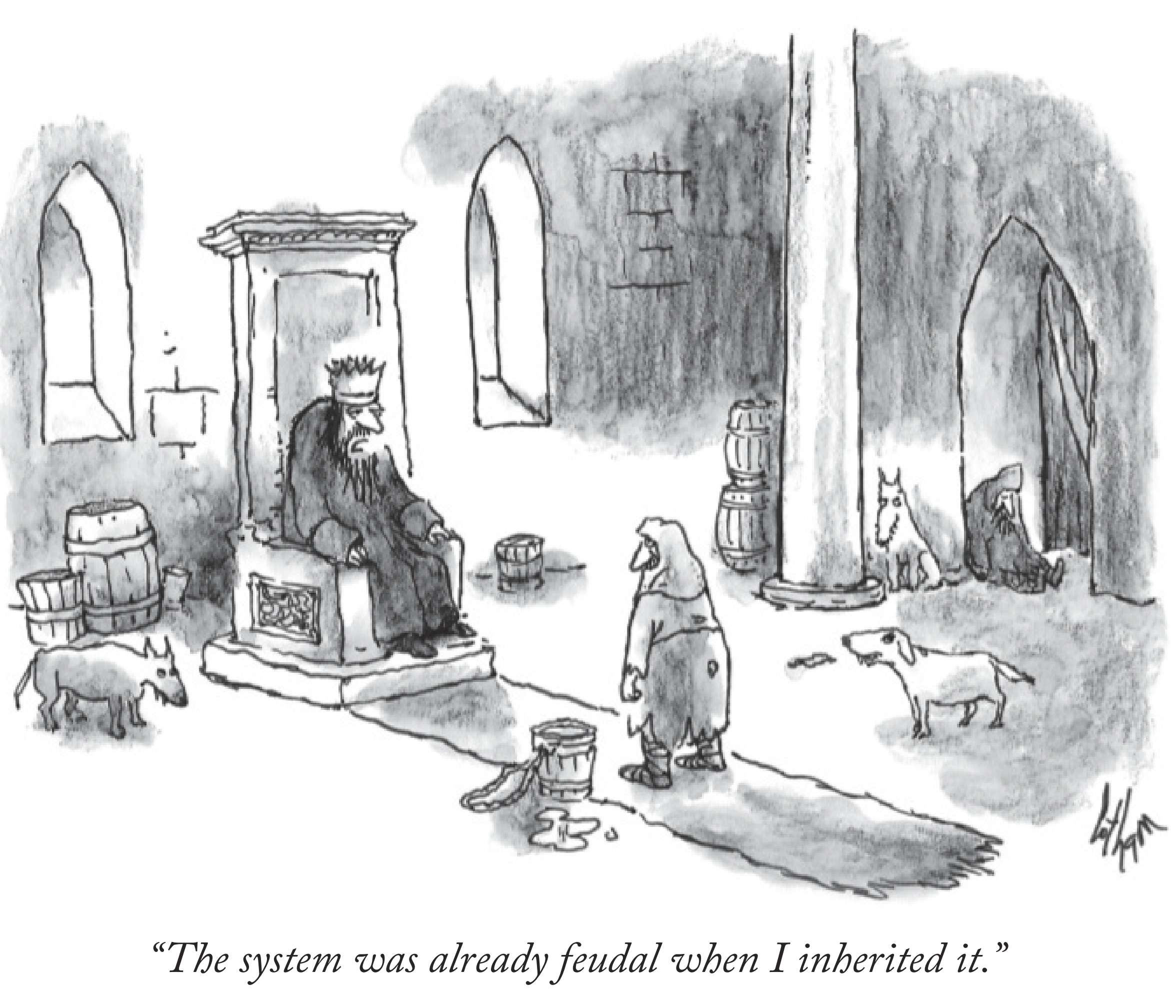
Hopes for the great love born of a common pain, for two united souls sharing grief in long, easy banter while they fend off physical attraction and misread each other until everything seems to change one afternoon, smoking behind the trailer on a particularly rough day—a triaged bus accident that included one double amputee, a burn victim (for him), and (for her) a woman who came in with a story to tell about her previous stones and a time when she was so bad, lying on her side in her living room, bucking in agony, that she begged her husband to kick her, and he did just that, walloping her, and her husband was arrested, of course, but it worked, and the stone passed in her piss. The cops wouldn't listen to her side of the story, though, and her husband ended up in jail. Damn right, Marlon said—and then, just after she finished that story, there was the whoop of a siren and an E.M.S. pulled in and they watched while overhead, from a thin stack on the roof of the hospital, a bloom of smoke emerged into the early-autumnal sky, the incinerated aftermath of old bandages and bloodied towels, afterbirths and whatever else could be burned to save the hospital disposal fees.

ONE AFTERNOON IN SEPTEMBER

He said, I love hearing your stories. I love your stories, too, she said, touching his shoulder.

WE SHOULD GET OUT OF HERE

After this shift, take a drive, he said, shrugging his shoulder toward the emergency entrance, where the orderlies were removing a gurney from a truck, lowering it with a count. And she waited to answer, because she wanted him to beg a little, to hear how much his desire had accrued over the weeks—small hand brushes and gestures, one to the next—and because she took care with



“The system was already feudal when I inherited it.”

matters of the heart, the past having taught her that a hit could come as easily as a kiss.

THEY DROVE

Up the old state road through autumn dusk, talking softly and listening to music as the river appeared and disappeared to the right and she fiddled with the old-radio punch buttons, feeling the mechanism moving the pointer as it slid from station to station.

THEY BOTH FELT

The sensation of going north, while he told stories about growing up, the gangs that ruled the neighborhood, the way they used to play along the river, and then, around the switchbacks of Storm King and passing through the desolation of Newburgh, he said, I think *this* here is probably the loneliest road in America, and they headed out of town, continuing north as the road opened into four lanes and then back to two, skirting old estates and monasteries, until they reached a small hotel up on a berm on the left, painted pink, with a quivering neon sign that said River Rest, something from an old movie.

NO

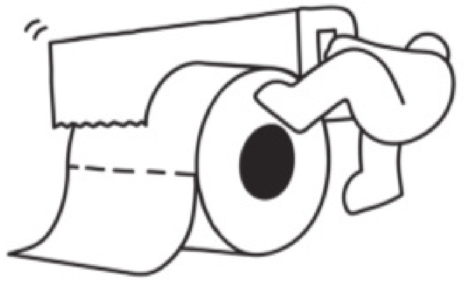
Wait, before they got to the hotel they stopped at a diner, sharing a meal, and then in the parking lot they smoked and leaned back, gazing up at the stars—and if you'd been looking you would have seen them there and speculated on two people lingering in an upstate parking lot, kissing each other gently, and you would've extrapolated a story from that image.

NO

Wait, there were a lot of other conversations, late in the summer and early in the fall, as they stared out at the road and the ball field and the sky, testing each other, teasing, griping about work and life in general, sharing deeper stories that'll never be recorded, not here, and not in memory, so that later, looking back, it would seem that in the fall, on a cold afternoon, they had both decided on a whim to take the leap, to hook up, to go into the future together, to consummate the hesitant, careful nature of their personalities, because they were both damaged, somehow lost, and sensed and felt—you'd see if you'd been watching—a suddenly deep need for each other.

NO

Wait, go back to the afternoon she told him the Kidney Boy story, to the way that exchange had worked temporally, the things that were withheld and the things that were expressed, the way she told Marlon how she imagined the kid, whose name was Curt, going up to the bridge, standing on the railing and looking straight ahead—at the bend in the river, the beautiful vista. Go back to the way the exchange transpired—almost wordlessly, but not quite—that afternoon between Marlon and Gracie, and how he said "of course," after she told him Kidney Boy's real name, Curt, and then he laughed and said, All those stoners have short names, like Hank, Curt, Al. How after she'd talked about the broken jaw she abruptly changed the subject to something her dentist had told her about boys (she said boys) coming into the office on Sunday afternoons with bar-fight jaws, broken teeth. Go back to how, after she'd told Marlon about the dentist, an old couple appeared between the sliding doors and began a slow, shuffling walk across the parking lot, holding each other up, and how he paused (holding off on the nursing lecture) and said, How did Curt die? He said it before she could tell him the fact. Not so much guessing as seeming to have a prophetic insight. And she said, Hey, how'd you know?, and he shrugged and looked away and listened as she explained that Curt had jumped from a bridge, and then, right then, the wind lifted and litter skittered and an E.M.S. came into the emergency bay and across the street there was the high, metallic, and beautiful sound of kids playing before she began to cry.



NO

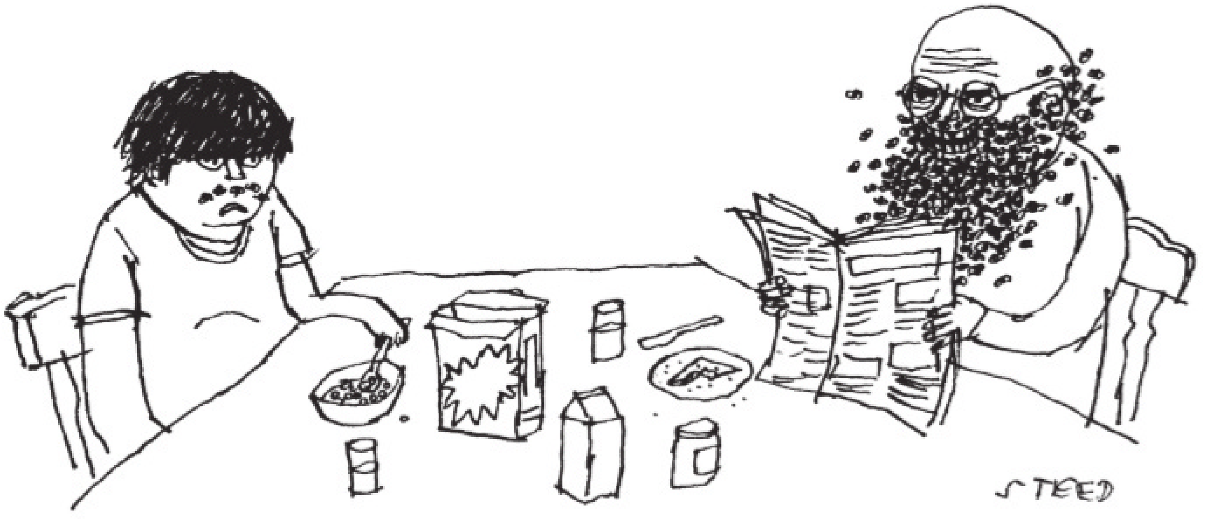
Wait, go back to the way he emerged from the sliding glass doors in his Army fatigues over his scrubs with his hood pulled up around a face grimly set, his small mouth puckered, as if he were deep in thought, until he got near the trailer and pulled his hood down and shook his head to let his hair out and paused for a moment, extending his arms as if for an embrace, and then said, Heyya, heyya, and gave her a hug while she held the story she wanted to tell him about the crazy old lady up in Poughkeepsie, because she always had one bottled up, at bay, and that was part of the dynamic, the urge to talk to him, and to hear him talk back.

NO

Wait, go back behind the trailer, to that particularly rough day, a triaged bus accident, two D.O.A. and one double amputee, for him, and for her an old man with a stone the size of the Hope Diamond in for the second time, and the lady who argued over her technique with the pounder, giving her grief, and to make up for it decided to tell Gracie her life story, ten stones in five years—was what she said—and a slow passer, taking her time, a regular at the hospital. And then Gracie told Marlon about her mom, about the way her stepfather had beaten them both, and then about Roy, the guy at Holiday Court, this wiry older guy—at least he seemed older to me at the time, she said—who had a motorcycle and took her for rides, and then she stopped speaking and let Marlon see in her face the things she wanted him to see, that she had suffered at the hands of Roy.

NO

Wait, go to the moment when suddenly, out of the blue, a freak snow squall had appeared from a cloudless sky, and he said it was a good omen, and she told him he was full of shit, and they fell into a hysterical laughing fit together as, once again, an E.M.S. came roaring in—siren whooping—as if to counterpoint their joy and delight with the urgency of some other realm, and how that moment, amid the countless others, somehow sealed a fate between them within the shared eternity of those moments.



"Is that supposed to be a beard of bees?"

• •

NO

Wait, go back to that afternoon, when he said, We should get out of this place, or perhaps he said, We should get away from this joint, and shrugged a shoulder back toward the emergency entrance, where—with a clank-and-clattering sound—they were removing a gurney from the truck, lowering it on a count, which was a sign of something horrible, because they only did that for the messed-up cases, the damaged goods, and she waited a few beats to answer Marlon, because she wanted him to say it again, to beg a little bit, to see just how much desire had accrued over the weeks, from one small hand brush to another, from one gesture to the next, because that was all she had in the end: all she had—she sometimes felt—was the small accumulations, one upon the next, because the past had taught her to take care with all of that, to be frugal with matters of the heart. A hit could come as easily as a kiss. The back of a hand could arrive at a moment's notice. This physics was in her bones, in the way she drew herself slightly away, even now, when he reached out to touch her shoulder. She felt herself—with the breeze blowing her hair around her eyes—withdrawing a little bit from the pliant urgency in his voice when he told her that he just felt like getting away. So she waited until he added, I'm not hitting on you, I'm just proposing a drive up the river, and then they both laughed at that. And she waited a few more beats, and then said, Sure, which was, he thought, the most beautiful word in the world.

SO

Now they were in a bed, in the shadowy hotel light, listening to the occasional car passing on the road.

IN THE SAGGING BED

He heaved into her, lifting himself up on his hands, while she held his shoulders, her fingers sliding around to feel the scar coming down from his neck and channelling out in two lines that then met again around his left nipple to form a craterlike hollow, and she drew on her time in nursing school, testing the tissue where the shrapnel went in and stayed in and burned—he'd later say—phosphorous white and hot enough, thank God, to cauterize the wound and seal off the blood vessels. He thrust down and deep and then eased up as she pushed against him—forgetting his scars—until the two motions spun into what seemed to be an airless freedom. He grunted, and she came, too, her finger flicking.

A SOFT WEEPING

Sound—as close to crying as you could get—and when she made that sound he made it, too, and together they were making one sound, and then he rested his weight against her and recalled her hand down there, fluttering, reminding him of the old woman's hand and of his grandmother's, too, because to touch herself she'd had to bend and flex it, and remembering the feeling after the fact he felt sure that he would tell her what had really happened to the old lady in Fallujah, or at least later—much later, years later—he'd see that image and use it to justify having told her about it.

DEEP IN THE NIGHT

He nudged her awake and explained that he was the one who'd gone trigger happy on the old lady in Fallujah, shooting her as she came around the corner on raw impulse instead of thought, taking her out from twenty yards away.

HE CRIED

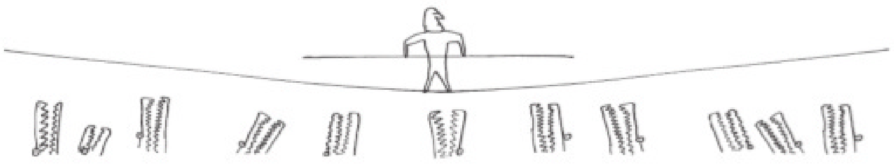
Against her shoulder as she said, softly, It's all right, Marlon, you're here now and it's going to work out, you're a damn good nurse, and then it seemed as if all she had ever learned on the job came into play as she spoke soothingly to him, making a gentle patting motion on his back, the kind of gesture you'd use to calm a baby at night—a gentle repeated pat, not too soft and not too hard.

SO THAT

The deepest enigmatic meaning would seem to stay around that image, not just of the two of them crying together but also of the hand itself, as it fluttered alone, which had led to his admission, and for her that image would hold another meaning, because she would remember it, too, vaguely, and replicate the motion countless times over the years, giving herself pleasure, just as she'd often backtrack through her memory of that summer and fall, drawing on the random moments, trying to find the origin point of their love. ♦

THE WRITER'S VOICE PODCAST
David Means reads "Two Nurses, Smoking."

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE BIG HEINIE

How Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig brought stardom to America's pastime.

BY LOUIS MENAND

Professional sports right now is a COVID-19 ghost town. The games have vanished. There are few events to cover and almost nothing to broadcast. Yet, eerily, the industry lives on. Reporters file stories and analysts hold forth even though the stadiums are empty. Athletes are paid even though they are sitting around the house. A chunk of your cable bill is going to Major League Baseball even though there are no major-league baseball games to watch. M.L.B. is selling Mookie Betts Dodgers jerseys and the N.F.L. is selling Tom Brady Buccaneers jerseys even though no one knows when they will ever play for those teams. In Las Vegas, you can get 3–1 odds on the Yankees to win the World Series.

It's a reminder that the industry is much bigger than the games and, in a sense, only minimally needs them. Sports sells newspapers, television shows, Web sites, as-told-to books, and exercise regimens. Professional athletes make endorsements, get paid for appearances, take parts in movies, license their names to video games, and have their own product lines. The stars at the very top of their sports make more money from these things than they do from competing. And, of course, there's the gambling. The idea of games in empty arenas is not as far-fetched as it sounds. As long as you have stars and scores, you have an industry. Hot-dog venders and parking-lot attendants will be out of work, but most of the business can go on.

The rise of sports as big business and the handling of athletes as human capital are often dated to 1960, the year Mark McCormack founded the International Management Group, with Arnold Palmer as his first client. McCormack saw that in sports, as in Hollywood, it's the stars that sell the product, and he turned athletic success and good publicity into dollars. Thanks to television, the number of available dollars for the clients of sports agents mushroomed.

But the possibilities had been glimpsed and the opportunities realized almost forty years earlier, by a man named Christy Walsh. Walsh was born in St. Louis in 1891, and went to college in Los Angeles. He bounced around a little—worked as a sports cartoonist and a ghostwriter—but it was his background in advertising and publicity for automobile companies that prepared him to become the first sports agent in the modern mold. He wasn't just a promoter or a handler but someone who took charge of an athlete's complete on-field and off-field package, who controlled the publicity as well as the contracts. He signed his first client in 1921. And that client turned out to be the greatest sports figure of his day, or possibly, with the exception of Muhammad Ali, of any day: Babe Ruth. Ruth didn't just do what every ballplayer did but better. On the field and off, he was in a class by himself.

Walsh began working for Ruth just as advertising was joining forces with the new "science" of public relations, a union that produced the entertainment-media-merchandising combine that supplies much of the content for contemporary American culture. Walsh understood how that synergy worked, how the entertainment feeds the media and the media feeds the sales. Stories in the papers about Babe Ruth visiting an orphanage, say, are good for the Babe Ruth brand. They raise the value of Ruth's next endorsement deal. But stories about Babe Ruth also sell newspapers, which then can sell more advertising space. It's in everyone's interest (including the orphanages') to make Ruth a magnet for public eyeballs. All Ruth has to do is to keep hitting home runs and winning championships. The agent takes care of the rest.

This multiplier effect is why the stars' incomes keep rising exponentially—why Tiger Woods, who has made about a hundred and twenty million dollars in prize money, is said to be worth close to a billion. Everyone in the combine wants Tiger to continue to make money so they can continue to make money off Tiger.

As several writers, including Jane Leavy, in "The Big Fella: Babe Ruth and the World He Created" (2018), and Thomas Barthel, in "Babe Ruth and the Creation of the Celebrity Athlete" (2018), have explained, Ruth seems to have been the first athlete to leverage his success in this way, to make more money off the field than on it. By 1926, his twelfth year in the major leagues, Ruth's salary was fifty-two thousand dollars, far more than any other ballplayer's, but he made at least twice that much in outside income. Shortly after ending the World Series that year by being tagged out trying to steal second base, he went on a twelve-week vaudeville tour for which he was paid a hundred thousand dollars.

It's no coincidence that the decade in which this entertainment-media-merchandising combine developed is known as the Golden Age of American sports. When writers use that term, they are not talking only about the games. They

PHOTOGRAPH OF LOU GEHRIG FROM EVERETT; OPPOSITE: SERGE BLOCH

Gehrig's name will forever be linked with Ruth's. They were the best hitters in baseball, but they were polar opposites.

are talking about the stars, people like Ruth, Red Grange, Bobby Jones, Johnny Weissmuller, Jack Dempsey, Bill Tilden, Helen Wills, Gertrude Ederle. They dominated their sports. They set records. And the combine loves records.

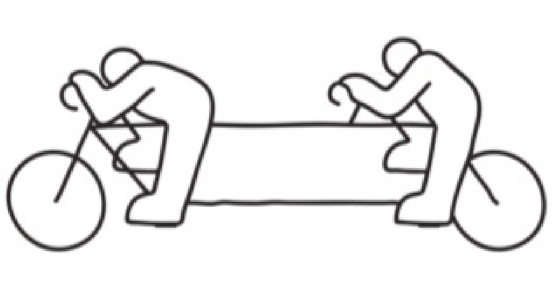
Christy Walsh did not invent celebrity product endorsements and appearance fees. Before Ruth met Walsh, he had already endorsed a brand of baseball bat and of cigars, and a children's book, "The 'Home-Run King'; or, How Pep Pindar Won His Title," had been published under his name. Walsh simply widened the stream. He arranged for Ruth to act in vaudeville and movies. He put Ruth and some of his teammates on barnstorming tours, playing exhibition games around the country. (Each year, Ruth was paid to play from fifty to a hundred off-season games.) Ruth's endorsement appeared on more than a hundred products, including Quaker Oats and All-America underwear. (The Baby Ruth candy bar was marketed without Ruth's consent. Ruth sued, but the courts backed the candy-maker.) His face was on the cover of magazines from *Time* and *Vanity Fair* to *Hardware Age* and *Popular Science*. In 1934, when the Associated Press ranked the most photographed people in the world, Ruth was No. 1, ahead of F.D.R., the Prince of Wales, and Adolf Hitler.

Walsh's first deal for Ruth was a newspaper column, though the star never wrote—or likely even read—a word of it. Ruth's ghostwriters were usually reporters who travelled with the team, hung out with Ruth, and picked up enough odds and ends—Ruth telling the story of his most recent home run, for instance—to turn out a weekly column. And the money was good. In the first year, after Walsh and the writers had taken their cuts, Ruth made fifteen thousand dollars. Walsh went on to create a stable of more than thirty ghostwriters who produced columns under the bylines of athletes such as Ty Cobb, Dizzy Dean, Walter Johnson, and Rogers Hornsby. Among them was a twenty-four-year-old first baseman named Lou Gehrig.

Gehrig's name will forever be linked with Ruth's. They were the best hitters on the best team in baseball, the New York Yankees. Between 1920, the year Ruth started playing for the Yankees after being sold to the team by the owner of the Boston Red Sox, and 1938, Gehrig's last full season, the Yankees won ten American League pennants and seven World Series. (Ruth also won two championships as a pitcher for the Red Sox, setting a Series record of twenty-nine and two-thirds consecutive scoreless innings, which would not be broken until 1961.)

The 1927 Yankees have been called the greatest team in baseball history. With Ruth hitting third and Gehrig cleanup, the Yankees won a hundred and ten games, and lost only forty-four. Ruth batted .356 and hit sixty home runs, a single-season record that lasted for thirty-four years and has been surpassed by only four men, three of whom are widely believed to have been jacked up on steroids. Gehrig hit .373, with forty-seven homers and a hundred and seventy-three runs batted in—a record for R.B.I.s at the time and not an easy thing to do when the man ahead of you hits sixty home runs. In the World Series, the Yankees beat the Pirates in four straight.

Gehrig idolized Ruth as a ballplayer, and Ruth was easy to get along with. They travelled together, played bridge together, and barnstormed together. They had both started out as pitchers—Gehrig pitched in college, but Ruth won ninety-four games in his big-league career and had a lifetime E.R.A. of 2.28, seventeenth on the all-time list—and they sometimes pitched to each other in exhibition games. Ruth was often a guest for dinner at Gehrig's house.



But they were polar opposites. Ruth was all flamboyance and swagger. He bought expensive cars and wrecked them. He wore raccoon coats and smoked big cigars. He gambled and caroused. His annual contract negotiations were big news. He was famous to the public for his appetite for food and drink; he was famous to his teammates for his appetite for sex. He made no secret of it. Fred Lieb, who covered the Yankees, wrote, "His phallus and home-run bat were his prize possessions, in that order."

On road trips, Ruth would be out all night partying, getting back to the hotel at dawn. "I don't room with Babe Ruth," his assigned roommate on one trip, Ping Bodie, is supposed to have said. "I room with his suitcase." The team, in exasperation, once hired a detective to follow him around one night when the Yankees were in Chicago. The detective reported back that Ruth had been with six women.

It had no effect on his play. "The Babe was always doing something," Marshall Hunt, a reporter who covered Ruth year-round for the *Daily News*, recalled. "Perpetual motion. . . . I don't think I ever saw him sitting around." The key to Babe Ruth, though, was this: everybody loved him. "God, we liked that big son of a bitch," Waite Hoyt, the ace of the 1927 Yankees team, said. "He was a constant source of joy."

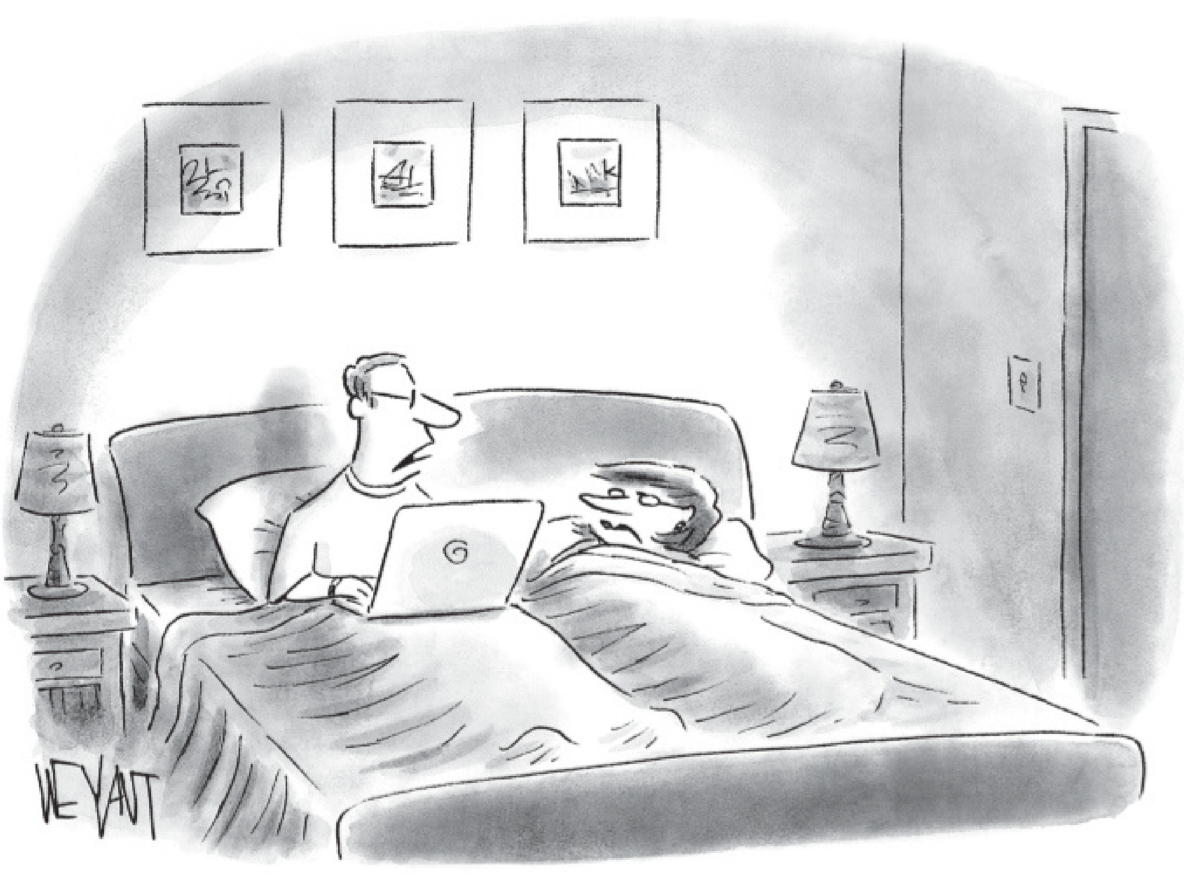
Everybody respected Lou Gehrig. They did not love him. He was good-natured but distant. He had a distinctly un-Jazz Age persona. "This sturdy and serious lad takes copybook maxims as his guides in life and lives up to them," a *Times* columnist wrote after the Yankees won the Series in 1927. " 'Strive and succeed.' 'Early to bed, and early to rise.' 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.' 'Labor conquers everything.' And all the rest of them."

Ruth had a gift for baseball. He was not only the best power hitter on the Yankees; he was also the best bunter. When he played the outfield, he never threw to the wrong base. Those were things Gehrig had to work at. Fielding was a challenge. Just figuring out which foot to put on the bag (he played first base, the traditional position for oversized sluggers with limited defensive skills) was a challenge. "He was one of the dumbest players I've ever seen," Miller Huggins, Gehrig's first Yankee manager, said. "But he's got one great virtue that will make him: he never makes the same mistake twice."

"Ruth has the mind of a fifteen-year-old," the president of the American League once said in frustration during some Ruthian commotion. Gehrig was a case of arrested development, too, but in a different way. Until 1933, when he turned thirty, he lived with his parents.

He brought his mother to spring training. When the team was on the road, he would leave the hotel after dark and walk the streets by himself so his teammates would think he had plans. He usually signed whatever contract the Yankees sent him. In 1927, the year he was the American League M.V.P., his salary was eight thousand dollars. The following year, it was raised to twenty-five thousand. Ruth was making seventy.

In short, Gehrig was a Golden Age anomaly. In 1929, *The New Yorker* ran a profile of him, with the interesting title "The Little Heinie." "Lou Gehrig," it began, "has accidentally got himself into a class with Babe Ruth and Dempsey and other beetle-browed, self-conscious sluggers who are the heroes of our nation. This is ridiculous—he is not fitted in any way to have a public." The reporter asked Gehrig if he planned to get married. "My mother makes a home comfortable enough for me," he said. Unlike Ruth and Dempsey and the rest of the Golden Age stars, Gehrig did not want attention, and this was because, unlike the others, he did not need attention. He stayed in his lane. He liked being boring.



"I was too anxious to sleep, too sleepy to work, and too lazy to go to the kitchen."

• •

Part of the mythology of American sports in that era was that it was a means of social mobility, a way for the children of farmhands and factory workers to make their way into the middle class, and even, for special talents, to acquire wealth and celebrity. In the case of baseball, at least, the myth was mostly a myth. Ballplayers in Gehrig and Ruth's time came from families that were relatively well off. Steven Riess, in "Touching Base," a study of the sport in the early years of the twentieth century, reported that, of players active between 1900 and 1919, only eleven per cent had fathers who were unskilled or semi-skilled laborers, even though forty-five per cent of workers nationwide were semi-skilled or unskilled. Ten per cent had fathers who were professionals, against three per cent in the population as a whole.

But the myth *was* true for some of the Golden Age stars, Ruth and Gehrig among them. When Ruth was seven years old, his parents sent him to St. Mary's Industrial School for Orphans, Delinquent, Incorrigible, and Wayward Boys, in Baltimore, basically a reform school run by brothers of the Order of St. Francis Xavier, and he spent most of the next dozen years there. It's where he learned to play baseball. "I didn't have a thing till I was eighteen years old, not a bite," he said years later, when he was living the high life. "Now it's bustin' out all over."

Gehrig's parents were German immigrants. His father was a metalworker who was often unemployed. The family was held together by Gehrig's mother, Christina, a dynamo who cooked, cleaned, and did laundry to support the family, and who took over the life of Lou, her only surviving child. They lived in Yorkville, in upper Manhattan, and were poor even by the standards of the neighborhood. They later moved to Washington Heights. Lou's nickname at school was Fat.

The Gehrigs spoke German at home; Lou did not learn English until he was five. (German was also the language in Ruth's house, and he spoke some German when he came over for dinner.) Gehrig got the attention of the sports world when he was in high school, after hitting a tape-measure home run at Cubs Park, in Chicago, where Gehrig's team, New York City's best, had gone to play Chicago's best. That was in 1920, the year Ruth came to the Yankees.

Gehrig enrolled at Columbia (his mother had worked in a Columbia frat house), starting, painfully, in the extension school. He found schoolwork a struggle, but he was essentially a recruited athlete, playing football and baseball and clouting mammoth home runs.

Before Ruth came along, most major-league baseball was "small ball." Hitters choked up on the bat and tried to advance the runner. It was a game of bunts and stolen bases. Ruth was a free swinger. He struck out a lot, as home-run hitters do, but when he connected he hit circus shots that flew over the fences and often landed on a street outside the park. It turned out that people found the monster homer more exciting than the hit-and-run. Ruth transformed the sport.

Scouts now found themselves tasked with discovering "the next Babe Ruth," and Gehrig qualified. He signed with the Yankees in 1923, and on June 1, 1925, he took over at first base. He would play there for 2,130 consecutive games, a month shy of fourteen years. This was an era in which ballplayers had nicknames: Pepper Martin, Mule Watson, Muddy Ruel, Rabbit Maranville, Dazzy Vance, Pie Traynor. For years, sportswriters tried to come up with a nickname for Gehrig, but nothing seemed to stick. Then, in 1931, midway through the consecutive-game streak, a reporter for the

New York *Sun* named Will Wedge called him the Iron Horse. It stuck.

A minor irony of the Ruth-Gehrig dichotomy is that Ruth didn't look like an athlete. He had a big upper body but slender wrists and ankles and skinny legs—"toothpicks attached to a piano," as someone described them. Gehrig was built like a power hitter. He was muscles from top to bottom—his heinie was not little—and, while Ruth's homers were usually towering fly balls, Gehrig's were line drives. Also unlike Ruth, Gehrig was extremely good-looking. He was designed for the combine.

That is what Christy Walsh must have felt when he signed Gehrig up, in the summer of 1927, the Yankees' annus mirabilis. It was not the pennant race that was attracting the fans then. It was the so-called Home Run Derby between Gehrig and Ruth. (The press would reprise the derby in 1998 as a race between a pumped-up Mark McGwire and a pumped-up Sammy Sosa. The second time as farce.)

Ruth had set the single-season home-run record, fifty-nine, in 1921, and he boasted of his determination to break it. Gehrig was keeping pace, and the home-run lead seesawed between them through the summer. Walsh realized this was a good time to syndicate a column for Gehrig. "There was a ready market at boom prices, for the autobiography of this clean-living, level-headed son of a poor New York family," as he put it in his memoir, "Adios to Ghosts" (1937).

There were twenty-nine first-person Lou Gehrig columns, run under the headline "Following the Babe." "Gehrig tells his story of dreams come true—high school victories, college glory, and big league fame—in a manner that will inspire every boy and parent in the land," an accompanying description proclaimed. The columns appeared in the Oakland *Tribune*, the Pittsburgh *Press*, and the Ottawa *Daily Citizen*—three outlets obscure enough that they remained undiscovered for decades.

They were finally exhumed by Alan Gaff, who has brought them out as "Lou Gehrig: The Lost Memoir" (Simon & Schuster). "No matter who wrote down the words, there is no doubt that Lou's memoir came directly from the heart," he writes. Well, some doubt is possible. Like most sports autobiographies before Jim Bouton's "Ball Four," in 1970, Gehrig's "memoir" adheres to the code of the professional athlete, which is never to speak ill of another professional athlete or of one's sport. So Gehrig (or his ghost) writes of Ty Cobb, "Ty has been panned a lot. But he's a great fellow. . . . I consider Ty Cobb one of my best friends in baseball." A recent biography, "Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty," by Charles Leerhsen, suggests that Cobb's reputation as an especially vicious racist is undeserved. (Gehrig, for his part, was in favor of integrating the sport, and said so.) But it is undisputed that Cobb was a mean competitor who got into fights with opposing players and fans. Gehrig supposedly once tried to get into the Tigers' locker room after a game to beat him up. The incident is explained away in one column as a performance for the fans.

And it's like that in all the columns. Everyone is a great fellow; baseball is a noble sport—"I don't believe I would have met a finer group of men anywhere than I have met in baseball. Nor a squarer, fairer lot of men, either." Are these Gehrig's own words and voice? The information about his life clearly came from him, and one imagines the ghostwriter also asked him for his opinions of other famous players, like Cobb and Ruth, and then transformed whatever he said into anodyne language.

But reproducing the ghosted subject's actual voice was never the ghostwriter's job. Walsh would have stopped him if he tried. A ghostwriter was not supposed to write the way his celebrity talked, Walsh thought. He was supposed to write the way the public thought his celebrity talked. It's not about expression. It's about promotion. Still, Gehrig was a good guy, and he thought in clichés. If he had written the columns himself, they probably would not have sounded much different.

Unless you lived in or near a major-league city and could get to the stadium, newspaper accounts and box scores were almost the only way you could follow a team. That's why Walsh could make good money with his ghostwriting syndicate—the national appetite for baseball news and gossip was much greater than the supply. And one reason for this had to do with the way the league did business when Gehrig and Ruth played.

The owners of the Yankees, gentlemen known as "the two Colonels," Jacob Ruppert, Jr., and Tillinghast Huston, knew what they were doing when they paid a hundred and ten thousand dollars, plus a loan of three hundred thousand, to get Ruth from the Red Sox. Ticket sales were the main source of revenue, and Ruth started paying dividends right away. In his first year, 1920, he hit fifty-four home runs, and home attendance was more than a million, the first time any club had attracted that many fans. The Yankees were then sharing the Polo Grounds with the Giants, but in 1923 they moved into a new stadium in the Bronx, with seating for fifty-eight thousand fans. They made a lot of money.

They could have made more. In "Creating the National Pastime," the historian G. Edward White points out that, even as it was becoming *the* American sport, baseball was a business run in a strangely backward way. Basically, it seems not to have understood who its consumers were, or, even stranger, how many of them there were.

Team owners and league officials resisted several changes that would have helped the product and enhanced revenue. A glaring failure was the refusal to integrate the sport. Everyone knew there were great ballplayers in the Negro Leagues; Gehrig and Ruth sometimes played exhibition games against them. But baseball remained a Jim Crow sport until 1947.

There was also fierce resistance to night games. The technology needed to play night baseball was in place by 1909, when a minor-league game was held under the lights in Cincinnati. Everyone agreed that the conditions were fine. But the first night game in the majors, between the Cincinnati Reds and the Philadelphia Phillies, was not played until 1935. The first night game at Yankee Stadium was not played until 1946.

The Reds played seven night games in 1935; attendance was 130,337. Attendance for the team's sixty-nine home day games was 324,256. The lesson was obvious. But it should have been obvious all along, or at least since the introduction of Sunday games, sixteen years earlier, which had had a similar effect. Many sports fans are working-class people. They can't go to a weekday game during work hours. Whether it was baseball traditionalism or some hope to cast the sport as a professional-class diversion, or some combination, Major League Baseball was slow to adapt its product to the lives of its fan base. Teams in the Negro Leagues were playing at night long before, because that was the only time their fans could see them.

From the perspective of today's sports business model, nothing is more peculiar than prewar baseball's inability to grasp the financial potential of broadcasting. Some teams broadcast home games on local radio stations, but the stations did not pay a fee. In most cases, anyone with a radio license could sit in the stands and broadcast a game. It was not until 1936, a year after Ruth retired, that there was an American League policy of charging for broadcasting rights.

Radio turned out to increase attendance, too, especially in places where fans living in rural areas followed the games on the radio, and were sometimes motivated to drive two hundred miles to a city to watch a game. Still, none of the New York teams, the Yankees, the Giants, or the Dodgers, broadcast home games until 1939. That was the year Gehrig retired. In a way, it was his retirement, not his play and not even his streak, that made him an icon.

"I have one true friend," Gehrig says in one of the ghostwritten columns, "my mother. . . . She is now, and will always be, the greatest pal I ever had." She certainly made every effort. Jonathan Eig, in his biography of Gehrig, "Luckiest Man" (2005), says that Christina Gehrig systematically wrecked all of Gehrig's nascent romances, once going to a woman's home town to dig up dirt on her. In 1932, when the Yankees were playing World Series games in Chicago, Lou became interested in Eleanor Twitchell, a socially active twenty-eight-year-old with a sense of fashion, not Mrs. Gehrig's type. They began dating the following spring and were married in September.

Eleanor Gehrig changed her husband's life. She freed him from his mother's house; she took him to the ballet and the opera. (A favorite was "Tristan und Isolde," at which, she says, he wept, because, of course, he understood the words.) And she called on Christy Walsh to do promotional work. Walsh got Gehrig to do ads for Camel cigarettes and Aqua Velva. Gehrig was the first athlete to have his face on a Wheaties box.

A frank woman, Eleanor Gehrig left a memoir, "My Luke and I," which includes, along with other uncensored remembrances, a portrait of Christina Gehrig and what it was like to live in her house. It tells us a lot more about Lou Gehrig than his own memoir does:

> Built something like a lady wrestler, with yellowish gray hair snatched back in a bun. No hairdresser for her, certainly no makeup. Not that it would have mattered anyway, since she was in a state of steaming perpetual motion, no idle hands, chores around the clock. A huge breakfast prepared for her husband and son, then an attack on the sinkful of dishes, then an almost compulsive session with the vegetables and meat for the night's dinner.
>
> Finally, she would jam a hat on her head and leave for Yankee Stadium *with* Lou, in time for batting practice. Afterwards, back in the kitchen while Pop walked the dogs again and the parrot kept shouting baseball lingo until he was covered for the night. And at last the evening meal, starting with caviar on toast, thick soup, a Caesar salad, meat, potatoes, the vegetables, oversized dessert, the whole works. In the backwash of this way of life, several maids came and went as members of the cast; they simply got in the way of the steamroller.
>
> After dinner and the dishes, we would settle in the living room. Mom would grab either the crochet or knitting bag and get her fingers flying, uttering sage little philosophies like "what goes up must come down," and Pop would invariably nod in agreement.

Eleanor saw Ruth with unsentimental eyes, too. "As for the mighty Bambino," she tells us, "he seemed to me to be a pot-bellied, spindly-legged, good-natured buffoon. But he was clearly the big man when it came to baseball, or to anything else, for that matter. . . . You had to look at him and feel that you were watching one of the wonders of the world."

The marriage was happy but short. Gehrig's body began to fail him in 1938. He played in all one hundred and fifty-seven games that season, keeping his consecutive-game streak alive, and the Yankees won the World Series. But his hitting dropped off. By the following spring, it was clear that he could no longer play, and on May 2, 1939, the streak ended. He flew to Minnesota and entered the Mayo Clinic, where he was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—soon known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

It seems, in Eig's account, that the doctors never told Gehrig outright that A.L.S. is incurable. But athletes know their bodies, and he must have understood fairly soon that this was the end. He died, "like a great clock winding down," Eleanor said, in 1941. He was thirty-seven. When his body was displayed at the Church of the Divine Paternity, on Central Park West and Seventy-sixth Street, thousands of people stood in line to view it. Babe Ruth cut ahead of everyone. As he stood in front of the casket, he wept. Seven years later, Ruth would be dead, of throat cancer. In 1995, Gehrig's consecutive-game record was broken by Cal Ripken, Jr. The combine was all over it.

But before he died Gehrig had, at last, his Ruthian moment. This was the speech he gave at Yankee Stadium on July 4, 1939, Lou Gehrig Appreciation Day, his farewell to baseball. By then, everyone had heard the news. Tributes were spoken; gifts were presented. Ruth was there, said some words, put his arm around Gehrig for the cameras. Gehrig desperately wanted not to have to speak. This was exactly the kind of attention he had spent his life trying to avoid.

The announcer told the crowd that Gehrig was too moved to say anything, but a chant went up, and so he walked to the microphone. Eleanor later said that he had written an outline just in case; he clearly had some sentences memorized. Amazingly, only four of those sentences have been recorded and survive. Versions of the whole speech that you read have been pieced together from newspaper stories.

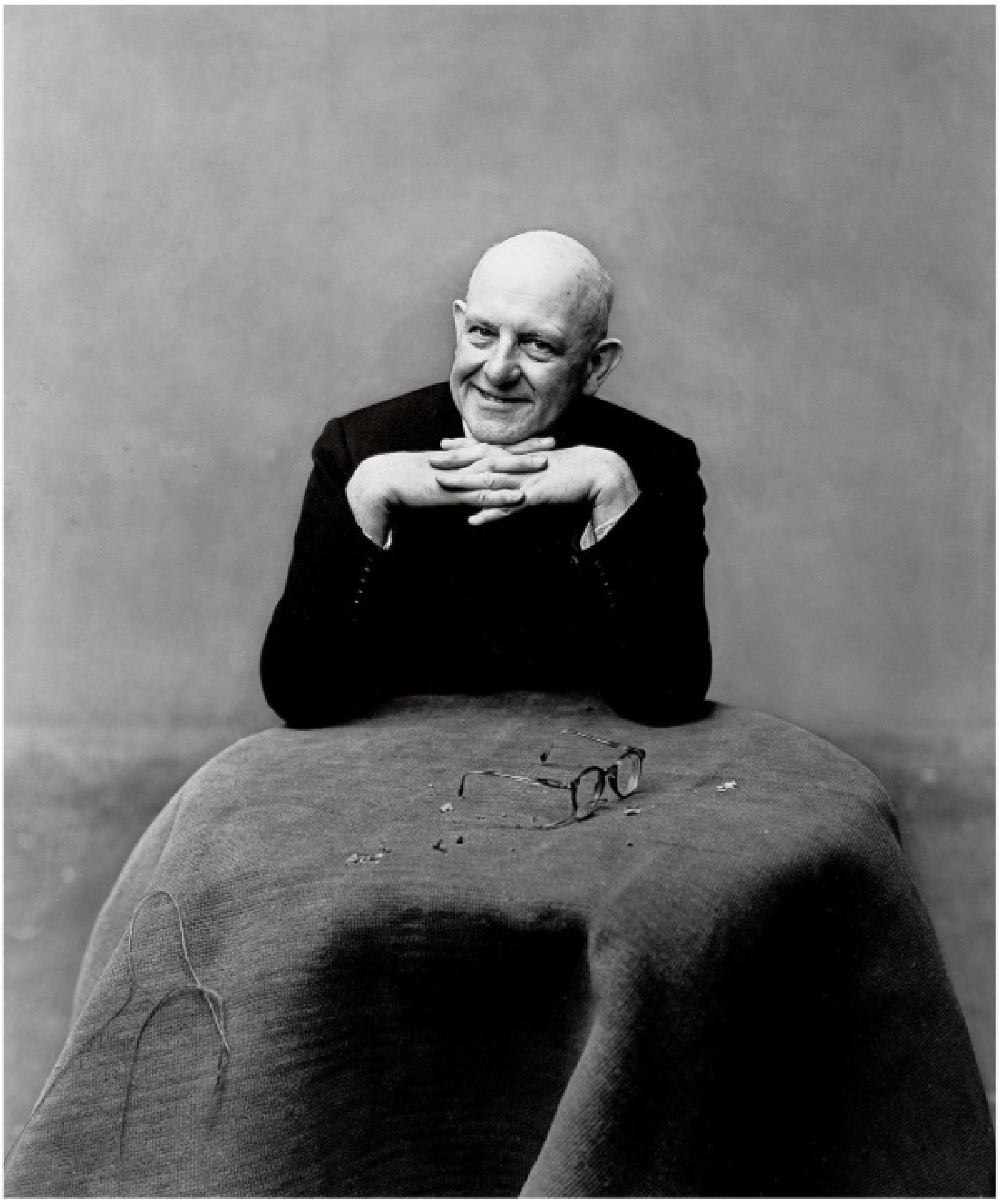
But we do have Gehrig's voice at the start. "For the past two weeks, you've been reading about a bad break," he says. "Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth." And at the end: "I might have been given a bad break, but I've got an awful lot to live for." There is nothing self-pitying in the speech, no self-denial, no defiance. He is helping other people get through his pain. This was not colorless or boring. This was a man looking at death. In an age of showmen, in the very House That Ruth Built, it was a transcendent moment of selflessness. ♦

BOOKS

WARTIME FOR WODEHOUSE

The indomitable spirit that led to a writer's inadvertent propaganda.

BY RIVKA GALCHEN



"A wonderful day!" Wodehouse wrote in his diary while in an internment camp.

PHOTOGRAPH BY IRVING PENN

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"Camp was really great fun," the English comic novelist P. G. Wodehouse wrote to an old school friend. He was speaking of the forty-eight weeks between 1940 and 1941 that he spent in a series of German-run civil-internment camps. He lost nearly sixty pounds. He was separated from his wife. He slept on a straw-filled mattress, and tried to avoid scabies and lice. At Tost, in what is now Poland, the fourth of four camps, Wodehouse was offered his own room, on account of his fame, and maybe his age. Declining the offer, he shared a cell with sixty-three others. He was nearly sixty when he was released. The only privilege of which he availed himself was paying eighteen marks a month for a typewriter. The typewriter was housed in a room also used by a saxophonist and a tap dancer.

Wodehouse was the third of four children born to a British colonial administrator and his wife, who were based in Hong Kong. At age two, he was sent to Bath, to be brought up by a nanny; he went to boarding school at age seven. This was not unusual for the time. "My childhood went like a breeze from start to finish," he wrote, half convincingly. "As for my schooldays . . . they were just six years of unbroken bliss." In his final year at boarding school, his father told him that there were too many kids to educate, and that Wodehouse could not go to Oxford, where his brother was studying. Instead, his father arranged for him to work as a bank clerk in London. He wrote articles and funny bits for the newspapers on the side. He didn't go out much. After two years, he decided that he could make a living by his pen alone.

The former bank clerk went on to write more than seventy novels and dozens of plays. By the time he was detained, he'd become a beloved national figure. While interned, he kept a journal. Here is a not untypical early entry:

> August 27. I am on potato peeling fatigue. Sergeant comes among us, patting our pockets to see we aren't pinching any! All very genial. One of the squad has an apoplectic fit and keels over. He had been smoking tea.

It is that "All very genial" that distinguishes Wodehouse from the irritable rest of us, while the observation of the fit from smoking tea shows that he isn't oblivious, or deranged. He frequently writes about difficulties in his camp notebook, just never at much length. "Today the bread ration failed and we had small biscuits," he writes, on August 12, 1940. "Many men with false teeth find it impossible to eat the biscuits in their natural state," he notes six days later. "Bitter wind and snow," he writes, in December. But, later in the same entry:

> Instance of ingenuity in Camp. –Dutch barber is asked by man accustomed to dye his grey hair every month if he can dye it. Later, barber is seen crouching on his bed, holding lighted match under jam jar of water, soft soap and boot blacking. –He sells the stuff to man for 83 pfennigs and man is very satisfied.

The first time I read Wodehouse's "Camp Note Book," I kept waiting to see the bonhomie and the buoyancy flag. It's a private notebook, after all. Maybe for the first weeks an illusion that internment was a brief change of circumstance would persist. It was a short situation comedy! But wouldn't that feeling fade? "A wonderful day!" he writes on August 14th, sure, but that was only a month in, and it was summer. What would he be thinking by November?

The entry for November 14th begins, "I must make a note of this day as one of the absolutely flawless ones of my life." Even if his private journal was a kind of performance—for himself? for future readers?—it was a very convincing one. (The pencilled journal pages can be read in the rare-books room of the British Library.)

Soon after his camp experience, Wodehouse paid dearly for his indomitable high spirits. Though, as in the twist of one of his plots, not in the way one might have expected.

Wodehouse's most enduring literary creation is the duo of Jeeves and Wooster. The two men feature in novels and stories that make up more than a dozen books. Bertram (Bertie) Wooster is a hapless but sweet member of the English upper class; Jeeves is his laconic, dry, and brilliant valet. Wooster gets into tangles. Jeeves gets Wooster out of tangles. The tangles are perennially gentle: Wooster gets engaged to a girl he doesn't want to marry, or is thought to have stolen a silver cow creamer that he has not stolen (though later will be pressured to steal). Sometimes Wooster dresses garishly—in a scarlet cummerbund, for example. Sometimes the stakes are even higher: Anatole, the master chef, is being hired away from Aunt Dahlia. Repeatedly, Jeeves makes tasteful interventions offstage, and the idyll of their lives—of all the lives, of all the characters—is restored. It's like Holmes and Watson, but no one ever gets murdered; no one even goes hungry.

My first encounter with Wodehouse was as a teen-ager, as my hard-of-hearing father stood two feet away from the television, the volume turned up to maximum. The Jeeves-and-Wooster stories were made into a television series, which began airing on PBS in 1990. My father, who was born in September, 1939, in the British-mandated Palestine, and grew up in a collective-farming community, and who by the goofy wheel of fortune was now teaching classes in fluid dynamics at the University of Oklahoma, in Norman—my dad thought "Jeeves and Wooster" was hilarious. In my memory, he watched these episodes, all of them, while wearing a towel, fresh out of the shower. That not-losing-a-minute feeling remains. I watched the episodes, too. Or at least was in the room while they were on.

I aspired to find the show funny, but didn't, really. We had a couple of the books in our house—"Right Ho, Jeeves" and "Joy in the Morning"—and I read them dutifully, more bemused than amused. Like that of many comfortable teen-agers, my reading taste was more for the moody, or the extreme. I didn't fall for Wodehouse until I had passed through the inevitable losses, fears, disappointments, and embarrassments that even a fortunate person accumulates over the decades—only then did the Jeeves-and-Wooster books become essential comforts. These are not difficult modernist tomes. One favorite plot hinges on a banjolele. I don't necessarily read them front to back, but pick them up more as someone would a whiskey-and-soda, or a hymnal. The books are cozier than cozy mysteries, and, like a mystery, they help take one's mind off real calamities.

In June, 1941, Wodehouse was released. Civilian men were normally released at the age of sixty. Wodehouse was four months shy. It remains unclear why he was released early, but many well-placed American friends and journalists had lobbied on his behalf. In Berlin, he was reunited with his wife. Within days, he was asked by the German Foreign Office if he would record some radio broadcasts for American audiences. He had already written and published a lightly comic account of his time in camp for *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Very few English people heard the broadcasts when they first aired. But many English people heard that they happened. A week after Wodehouse was released, the journalist William Connor, writing under the pseudonym Cassandra, suggested in the *Daily Mirror* that Wodehouse's early release had been part of an unsavory deal. The English reading public mostly defended Wodehouse: it wasn't fair to speculate. A few weeks later, Connor delivered a BBC broadcast, following the nine-o'clock news. It called Wodehouse a traitor to England, and again claimed that he had engaged in a quid pro quo for his early release. There were angry letters to the BBC, calling the broadcast slanderous. But the idea was now up for debate.

I have taught the Wodehouse broadcasts for several years now, in a graduate writing seminar on comedy and calamity. The distance of time makes it difficult for students to imagine how the innocuous and honest Wodehouse voice of the broadcasts could get him into so much trouble. He describes having ten minutes to pack a suitcase while a German soldier stands behind him telling him to hurry up; his wife thinks he should pack a pound of butter; he declines, saying he prefers his Shakespeare "unbuttered." He also forgets his passport. His privilege and his political cluelessness are included in the joke: "Young men starting out in life have often asked me, 'How can I become an Internee?' Well, there are several methods. My own was to buy a villa in Le Touquet on the coast of France and stay there till the Germans came along."

Wodehouse didn't do the broadcasts in exchange for being released. But he did do them—he apparently received two hundred and fifty marks for his work. British forces had suffered through Dunkirk; London had been firebombed. The United States was not yet in the war, and we now know that the German Foreign Office saw the release of Wodehouse, who was beloved in America, as propaganda designed to keep the U.S. out of the war. The proposal for the broadcasts was part of a German plan. Wodehouse was a fool but not, by most definitions, a traitor. When he learned that the broadcasts horrified much of the English public, he recorded no more. He wrote to a friend that "it was a loony thing to do."

Connor's address on the BBC began, "I have come to tell you tonight of the story of a rich man trying to make his last and greatest sale—that of his own country." Later, he described Wodehouse falling to his knees as Joseph Goebbels asks him to bow to the Führer. Wodehouse and his wife had trouble getting out of Germany, but eventually moved back to France, then, after the war, to New York. The scandal of the broadcasts didn't diminish. Some British libraries banned his books. In 1946, when the new Attorney General, Sir Hartley Shawcross, was asked in the House of Commons whether Wodehouse would be tried for treason, he answered that the question would be addressed if and when the writer returned to England.

"I have no hesitation in saying that he has not the slightest realisation of what he is doing," a good friend of Wodehouse's wrote to the *Daily Telegraph*. "He is an easy-going and kindly man, cut off from public opinion here and with no one to advise him." George Orwell, in his essay "In Defence of P. G. Wodehouse," from 1945, concluded, of Wodehouse's broadcasts, that "the main idea in making them was to keep in touch with his public and—the comedian's ruling passion—to get a laugh."

When an M.I.5 officer and former barrister, Major Edward Cussen, interviewed Wodehouse, he said that he had wanted to reach out to his American public, who had written to him and sent him parcels while he was interned. Wodehouse said that there was also "a less creditable motive. I thought that people, hearing the talks, would admire me for having kept cheerful under difficult conditions but I think I can say that what chiefly led me to make the talks was gratitude." Later, Wodehouse wrote to the editor of *The Saturday Evening Post* that he didn't understand why the broadcasts were seen to be callous: "Mine simply flippant cheerful attitude of all British prisoners. It was a point of honor with us not to whine." Wodehouse failed to understand how even a children's bedtime story broadcast on Nazi radio could be a form of propaganda.

And yet, across time, Wodehouse's naïveté seems the less extraordinary of his qualities. There are lots of political fools. Wodehouse had a rarer trait, too: a capacity for remaining interested and curious, even in a setting of deprivation. His resilient happiness, to me, remains heroic, and more essentially who he was. In his second broadcast, he writes of going to sleep on the floor of his cramped cell: "My last waking thought, I remember, was that, while this was a hell of a thing to have happened to a respectable old gentleman in his declining years, it was all pretty darned interesting and that I could hardly wait to see what the morrow would bring forth."

Wodehouse's novels focus almost exclusively on the madcap troubles of the perilously leisured. Many take place in country houses, and often turn on such events as the hope of extracting an allowance increase from a difficult uncle. Wodehouse's camp notebook, by contrast, shows an eye for occupation, and especially for occupational contentment. "Met cook and congratulated him on today's soup," he writes. "He was grateful, because his professional pride had been wounded by grumblers saying there wasn't enough. He said he could have made it more by adding water, which would have spoiled it."

Wodehouse *had* to write. He was introverted, and, with the exception of schoolboy camaraderie, preferred to be at home, working. One thinks—if one has been reading a lot of Wodehouse—of those ducks elegantly moving across the water, as their duck feet paddle furiously, unseen below the surface. (I think that image may even come from a Wodehouse novel, but which one?) Even when Wodehouse was imprisoned a second time, for a couple of months, in 1944, he worked on a novel. He generally wrote one or two novels a year but published nothing in the U.K. between 1941 and 1945. It was the years of not being able to work—as opposed to internment—that must have been the real hell.

"Yeah, I tried cutting my own hair."

In 1938, Wodehouse published the third of the Jeeves-and-Wooster novels, "The Code of the Woosters." It came out serially in *The Saturday Evening Post*, and was the last of the books issued before his internment. "The Code of the Woosters" is perhaps the most madcap of them all. There are several confused engagements, a plot to steal a police helmet, a lover of newts studying how to make bold speeches, a mustachioed Fascist named Roderick Spode. Wooster relies on Jeeves to navigate the landscape, which at every moment threatens him with social embarrassment, at the least, and maybe with an engagement to a pretty woman he doesn't much like, at the most. It's low stakes at its highest; an epic form for the supremely minor.

The character of Roderick Spode is a lesson in how Wodehouse metabolizes politics. We meet Spode at an antique shop; he accuses Wooster first of stealing an umbrella, then of stealing a precious antique. Later, Spode reappears at the country house to which Wooster has strategically been deployed by his aunt, who is trying to secure funds for *Milady's Boudoir*, the literary magazine she runs. Spode appears as a real threat and as a buffoon—both. "I had described Roderick Spode to the butler as a man with an eye that could open an oyster at sixty paces, and it was an eye of this nature that he was directing at me now," Wooster narrates. Spode, we learn, is the head of the Black Shorts, a group clearly kin to Mussolini's Blackshirts, but hampered by a shortage of shirts. "Bare knees?" Wooster asks in disbelief, learning about Spode's activities. He is horrified . . . by the popliteal unpleasantness.

Spode threatens everything: two engagements, Wooster's bodily well-being, the literary magazine. (The larger threats are implied.) By the novel's end, Spode has been tamed. Not by force, or ethical argument, but by knowledge of his secret: he is a co-owner of Eulalie Soeurs, a women's-underwear line.

What a dream! That menace can be dispensed with so easily. In one of Wooster's most anxious moments in the novel, Jeeves offers him instruction on the hem of his trousers:

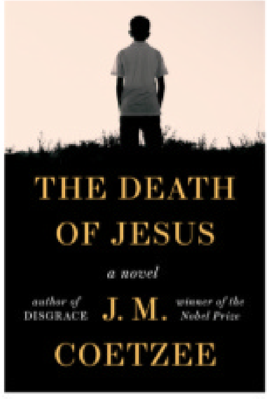
> "The trousers perhaps a quarter of an inch higher, sir. One aims at the carelessly graceful break over the instep. It is a matter of the nicest adjustment."
>
> "Like that?"
>
> "Admirable, sir."
>
> I sighed.
>
> "There are moments, Jeeves, when one asks oneself 'Do trousers matter?' "
>
> "The mood will pass, sir."

The Wodehouses ended up spending the last years of their life in Remsenburg, Long Island. His reputation in England was partly redeemed by the persuasive efforts of Evelyn Waugh, in a radio broadcast in 1961. Opposition blocked Wodehouse's being knighted in 1967, but sentiment was shifting. Connor became, according to Wodehouse, a "great" friend, and, in a 1961 letter, he asked Waugh not to say bad things about the journalist on TV. At the age of ninety-three, Wodehouse was finally knighted. He died a month later. He had published four novels in his nineties.

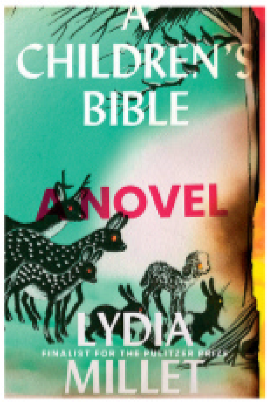
I'm reading Wodehouse novels every evening now, not because my own life is difficult—I'm eating a lot of peanut butter, and am healthy—but because whenever the impersonal or personal news cycle becomes overwhelming I find that it's easier to transition into a night of sleep after a character is described as looking like a bewildered halibut. Having taught Wodehouse for a few years, I've discovered that most students have never heard of him. This seems to me a missed opportunity to improve the public's mental health.

It is not the brilliant Jeeves who narrates these books. Jeeves is the Sherlock. The accounts of his brilliance can be credibly told only by the dimmer light—the mild Watson, the affably ineffective Wooster. I used to think that this was because it was easier to write the voice of a familiar fool than that of a mastermind. I no longer think so. The fantasy that there's a Jeeves who can resolve all problems is the necessary joy of these books. That fantasy would never hold if we heard him tell his own tale. ♦

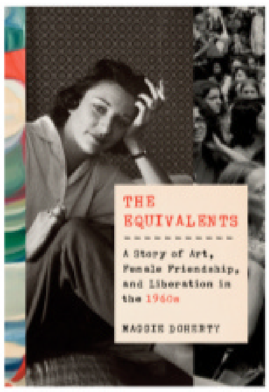
BRIEFLY NOTED



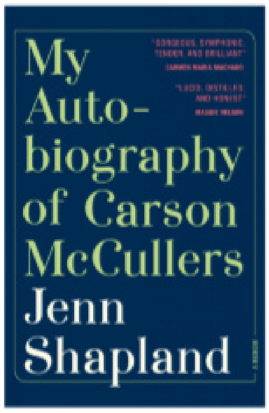
The Death of Jesus, *by J. M. Coetzee (Viking).* The trilogy of novels that began with "The Childhood of Jesus" (2013) ends as enigmatically as it began. David, the protagonist, is now a precocious ten-year-old, in an unnamed country where memories are expunged. After he forsakes his adoptive parents for a nearby orphanage, a strange illness renders him emaciated and epileptic, and he expounds idiosyncratic theories about celestial phenomena and "Don Quixote." His startling pronouncements and sudden death lead some to believe that he was a martyred savant. (Others see him as merely an unlucky child.) The novel, dense with veiled allegories and philosophical dialogues, challenges readers both to look for David's message and to question whether it existed at all.



A Children's Bible, *by Lydia Millet (Norton).* In this parable of the climate-change crisis, a group gathers for a reunion at a Gilded Age robber baron's summer retreat. While the adults fritter away the days, drinking and doing drugs, their preternaturally mature offspring devise a separate, parallel society. When a huge storm floods roads and destroys power lines, giving rise to disease and anarchy, the adults, in denial, remain inert and bank on imminent rescue. The children leave them behind, and set off to find safety. Millet mordantly captures the complacency of older generations in the face of apocalypse, and the righteous anger, endurance, and practicality of the young.



The Equivalents, *by Maggie Doherty (Knopf).* Founded in 1960, the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study, part of Harvard's sister college, offered financial support and other resources to women with doctoral degrees or the artistic "equivalent." This deft history charts the relationships among five of the earliest fellows: the poets Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, the painter Barbara Swan, the sculptor Marianna Pineda, and the writer Tillie Olsen. Doherty relates their often fraught intimacies in detail, emphasizing how these dynamics prefigured currents in American feminism and culture. The women's shared story shows both the potential and the limitations of a "room of one's own" as a liberating force.



My Autobiography of Carson McCullers, *by Jenn Shapland (Tin House).* Aiming to construct a new mode of lesbian history, the author combines research into the sexual life of Carson McCullers with an account of her own coming-out experiences. McCullers was drawn to the "misfits" of Southern society, including black, gay, or disabled people; she never hid her love of women, and surrounded herself with queer artists such as Tennessee Williams, Gypsy Rose Lee, and Paul and Jane Bowles. Shapland, who believes that McCullers has been retroactively closeted by peers and biographers, asserts that "queer embodiment, like Carson's, like mine, requires a presence, a negotiation with publicness." Accordingly, she finds herself "hunting for lesbians" in the literary world—an investigation that yields an unpretentious, moving record of love at the margins.

BOOKS

IN FROM THE COLD

A Hungarian essayist struggles against Enlightenment.

BY JAMES WOOD

László Földényi conjures a parable from Dostoyevsky's reading Hegel in Siberia.

Who could resist the title? László F. Földényi's new book of essays is called "Dostoyevsky Reads Hegel in Siberia and Bursts Into Tears" (Yale). It sounds like something that might happen in a Dostoyevsky novel: cause and effect scrambled, reason abolished by extremity, the thunderclap of irrationality producing religious storms of weeping and abasement. And behind it all something faintly farcical, deliberately exaggerated—another of Dostoyevsky's self-consciously scandalous "scenes." After all, who in world history has ever read Hegel and burst into tears? Except of frustration?

It turns out that we don't know if Dostoyevsky burst into tears, either; Földényi is punting here. But Dostoyevsky may well have read Hegel in Siberia. His American biographer, Joseph Frank, tells us that in 1854 he wrote to his brother in St. Petersburg, imploring him to send Kant, Vico, Ranke, and the Church Fathers, and "to slip Hegel in without fail, *especially Hegel's History of Philosophy.* My entire future is tied up with that." In 1849, Dostoyevsky had been arrested on bogus charges of revolutionary conspiracy in St. Petersburg, and sentenced to four years of hard labor in a prison camp in the Siberian town of Omsk. On his release, in the spring of 1854, he was sent to Semipalatinsk, in southern Siberia, where he began several years of military service. In effect, this was a further installment of exile: consignment to an "Asiatic" oubliette, a place unnoticed and forgotten, far from "European" Russia. Földényi, in the title essay of his collection, vividly sketches the town's stark otherness—a gray, treeless outpost, surrounded by barren sandy plains, with a population of between five thousand and six thousand, "half of whom were nomadic Kazakhs, for the most part living in yurts." An American journalist, visiting in 1885, struck by the sight of camels and "white-turbaned and white-bearded mullahs," likened the place to "a Mohammedan town built in the middle of a North African desert."

Hegel seems to have viewed Siberia similarly, except that he felt no need to actually see the place. Philosophically, Siberia was flyover country, of no world-historical import. In his "Lectures on the Philosophy of History," published for the first time in 1837, Hegel begins his discussion of Asia with a disclaimer: "We must first of all eliminate Siberia, the northern slope of Asia. For it lies outside the scope of our enquiry. The whole character of Siberia rules it out as a setting for historical culture and prevents it from attaining a distinct form in the world-historical process." This is what fascinates Földényi. What if, he hypothesizes, Dostoyevsky read Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of world history while in Semipalatinsk? How would it have felt to hear the great German rationalist philosopher casting you out from the notice of history (and thus from the narrative of European development as he tells it), even as your own country had similarly cast you out? How might that have compounded Dostoyevsky's punishment and suffering?

Földényi uses his essay to stage a broad metaphysical melodrama between opposites that he pursues throughout this fierce, provoking collection (expertly translated by Ottilie Mulzet). He likes to set up the Enlightenment tradition as overweeningly rational and then to use a selected opponent (Dostoyevsky, Heinrich von Kleist, Antonin Artaud, the Marquis de Sade, Mary Shelley) as an antirational or otherwise "Romantic" hatchet. Földényi makes Hegel his regal Enlightenment representative. And Hegel had indeed argued that univer-

ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL DAVIS

sal history, when viewed philosophically, is rational: "Whoever looks at the world rationally will find that it in turn assumes a rational aspect; the two exist in a reciprocal relationship." Hegel concedes that, down at the level of particulars, history is a bloody mess, even what he calls a *Schlachtbank*, a slaughterhouse; but he believes that, viewed from the right philosophical altitude, world history reveals itself as moving with purpose toward the realization and fulfillment of a Spirit—the universal idea of freedom. "Reason cannot stop to consider the injuries sustained by single individuals, for particular ends are submerged in the universal end," he wrote. In this sense, history is not only rational but also providential: designed, purposive, teleological.

In Siberia, however, Dostoyevsky fell in love with something like the opposite: with the irrationality of miracle, with the impossible example of Jesus, and, in a sense, with suffering itself. In "Notes from Underground" (1864), Dostoyevsky certainly seems to be thinking of Hegel when his narrator, the Underground Man, concludes that anything can be said about the bloodbath and the mayhem of history *except* that it is rational: "You'll choke on the word." One of the great fictional ranters, the Underground Man mounts an all-out war against the dominant ideologies of nineteenth-century Europe: utilitarianism, scientism, liberal progressivism, communistic utopianism, and, above all, the prestige of rationality. History is not rational, Dostoyevsky's narrator says, because humans are not. The human sciences are unable to account for our irrationality because they are unable to account for our desires. We want too many strange things (our "various little itches," as Dostoyevsky wonderfully describes them), often in defiance of our apparent interests: we want to go to war, martyr ourselves for religious causes, take drugs, climb steep rock faces, have perilous affairs. For Dostoyevsky, freedom is tortuous and fraught, in part because it also involves the freedom to abuse it.

Földényi, a scholar and critic who teaches the theory of art, in Budapest, is an intense, tendentious, often maddening presence. Few books have as utterly engrossed and powerfully alienated me as this one has. He is drawn to all that was violent and metaphysically reactionary in Dostoyevsky; he admires the religious fist held up to the calm omnipotence of European reason and progress. What is exciting about his title essay is the way he *inhabits* Dostoyevsky in his very unreason. There is something beautiful in this ventriloquism. Taking the fight to Hegel, Földényi speculates that perhaps history reveals itself not to rational people "*but to those whom it has cast out of itself*." In a brilliant moment of critical imagining—I think of Földényi as doing a kind of method acting—he jeers at Hegel's proposal that whoever looks rationally at history will find that it looks rationally back at him. Well, Földényi asks, when Dostoyevsky glanced into his small mirror in Siberia, what did he see looking back? Not a rational man. Perhaps not even a man but an alienated other: "Nobody *looks* back at us from a mirror. We can try to bravely face ourselves: our gaze is engrossed in the eyeballs of a *stranger*, who stares fixedly into nothingness. Not only does this stranger not look outward, he does not even look inward. He is dead, numb—if we pay long attention—even haunting."

The problem is that Földényi is not content to stage a merely imaginary struggle. He edges toward all-out brawls, generally between highly armed simplicities. On one side, there is Hegel, who is wielded by Földényi as the false god of everything most triumphantly repellent about Enlightenment rationality; and on the other side there is Dostoyevsky, righteously suffering and properly rebuking the European tradition for its secularizing arrogance. Földényi sees Hegel, and by extension the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Enlightenment project, as a vast, disenchanting bulldozer, crushing God and mystery under the machinery of its rationality. Hegel's narrative of history, Földényi says, might look religious, but in fact God has been dethroned. "In the Hegelian interpretation of history, everything designated 'divine' is subordinated to something under the supervision of human beings," he writes. Enlightenment rationalism proceeded "in the name of God, but lacking all divine spirit." Confident that it could solve everything, it sought explanation for things that could never be explained, and failed to respect the mystery of what Földényi calls "divine unboundedness" and, elsewhere, "the infinite and the transcendent."

As Földényi works away at this theme, his rhetoric becomes unguarded. Behind Hegel's dismissal of Siberia, he tells us, "lies his secret wish to assassinate God." European civilization has never been more convinced of its rectitude than it is now, and yet has never been more threatened, either. Heirs of Hegel, we are spoiled children, allowed to do whatever we want with our unchecked secular power. The true god of the modern age is technology; we are tremendously, imperially successful, but "we have murdered God with our ambition":

> And it is none other than our drive to find an answer for everything. When we began to seek solutions for things for which there are clearly no solutions, this ambition became transformed into hubris. In other words, it occurred when even transcendence itself turned into a practical question.

Földényi can sound much like Dostoyevsky at his most religiously reactionary, in the eighteen-seventies when he was writing his monthly columns, with titles such as "Slugs Taken for Human Beings" and "A Landowner Who Gets Faith in God from a Peasant." Földényi's title essay does more wild imploring than the rest of his book, which contains subtle, calmer pieces on Kleist, on Elias Canetti, on sleep and dreams, on happiness and melancholy. One clue to its extremity might be that he was writing about Dostoyevsky in 1997 (most of the other essays first appeared in the twenty-first century). Back then, as a Hungarian academic, he was still at the periphery of the confident European political project (Hungary didn't join the E.U. until 2004), a mere voyeur of the Western world's post-Communist self-congratulation, chafing at American-Hegelian predictions of "the end of history" yet hurtling toward an unknowable millennium. One can see how anxiety and skepticism might have led him to overidentify with a Russian sufferer cast out of history.

Still, the same strident argument keeps pushing its claw through even the milder pieces. It could be compacted into an aphorism by the Romanian-French philosopher E. M. Cioran: "We know a great deal about ourselves; on the other hand, we *are* nothing." Földényi regularly quotes Cioran (though not this particular sentence), and perhaps sees himself joining what is now a busy tradition of European lament, negation, and anti-Enlightenment critique, most of it by conservatives (like Carl Schmitt and Cioran himself), though occasionally by radicals (Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault); some of it atheistic (Friedrich Nietzsche), much of it religiously grounded (T. S. Eliot, Charles Taylor).

Földényi's version can be told like this: Enlightenment rationality not only displaced God and made a new god of reason—it redefined freedom as purely instrumental rather than metaphysical, as something humans can shape and control. But true freedom, Földényi believes, is "only achieved through that which surpasses (transcends) me"—what is beyond our powers, beyond our comprehension. If we renounce this otherworldly idea of freedom, we start building utopias on earth, which rapidly become dystopias. Here, Földényi closely follows Dostoyevsky, who had seen the Crystal Palace built, in London, for the 1851 Great Exhibition, and had shuddered with horror at this temple to capitalist triumphalism. Földényi's version of the Crystal Palace is what he calls, in an essay that takes the phrase as its title, "the globe-shaped tower"—the Tower of Babel, built by hubristic rationalism but spherical, to represent the single, globalized market of Western capitalism. When "the Good" became limited to utility, advantage, and pragmatism, "the globe began to shrink."

But what is this "transcendence" that has supposedly been banished from the world? If you read only Földényi's title essay, you might assume that he was a fervent Christian, but he's notably coy about *what* it is that transcends us. He talks about transcendent "goals," the importance of "remaining open to the metaphysical traditions," of how our lives are "nested within a much larger coherence," of "divine unboundedness," and even of "the divine." But if he really means God when he invokes the divine, why not say it? Dostoyevsky would not have been so mealymouthed. While excoriating rationalism for "the mistaken belief" that it can "explain the unexplainable," Földényi urges us to be mindful of our "human embeddedness within the cosmos." The person open to metaphysics understands that he "has received the gift of existence without ever having been asked about it, and he will lose his life as well without having been asked for his consent."

THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT HAD A HUSBAND, KIDS, AND A FULL-TIME JOB, AND DID EVERYONE'S EMOTIONAL LABOR ALL THE TIME.

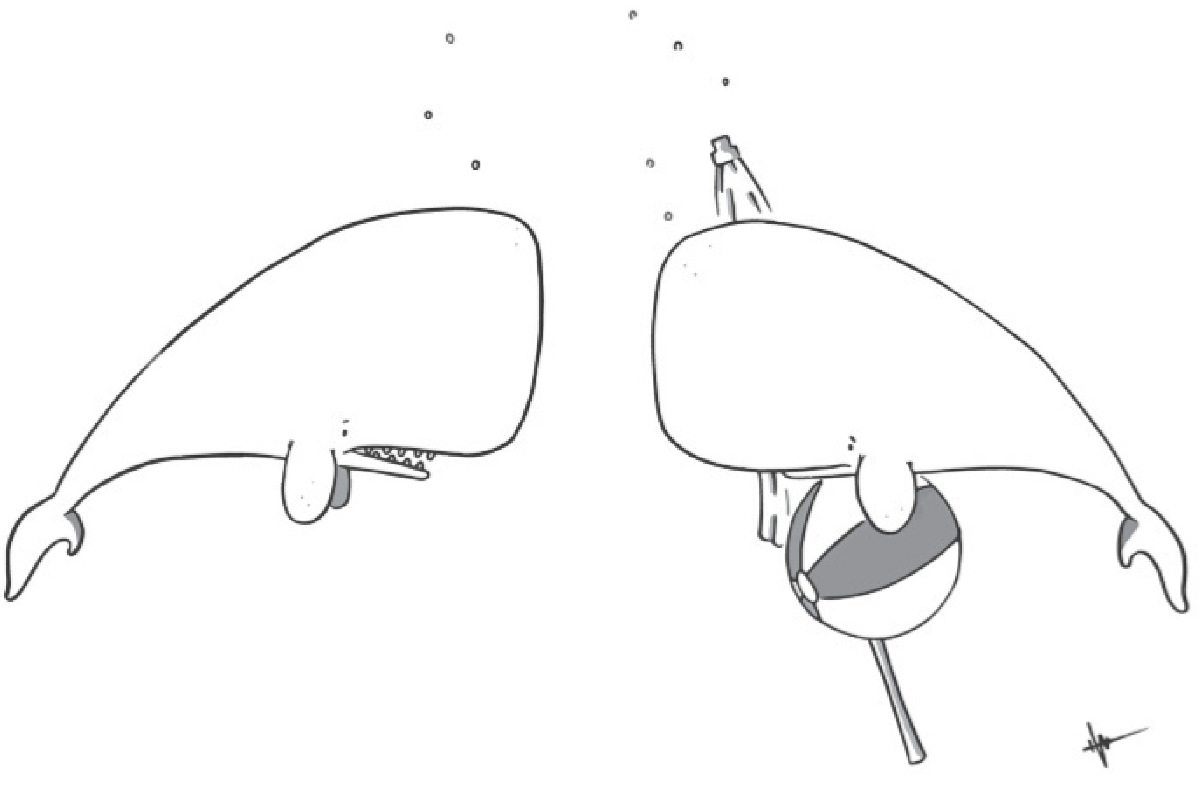
Surely, though, there's a large gap between acknowledging "the divine" (whatever Földényi means by this) and merely being "open to metaphysical traditions" (which sounds like a willingness to read a bit of Plato or Camus). Wisdom about the brevity of life, about how its gift was not requested and can easily be withdrawn, doesn't presume transcendence or the divine; it may presume the very opposite. This lament for a steady disenchantment with the world has been called a "subtraction story." The critic Bruce Robbins has pointed out that such elegies too easily conflate a loss of magic with a loss of meaning. To be without metaphysics is not to be without meaning. And are we without metaphysics, in any case? Hasn't cosmology shown us, with extraordinary clarity, a version of "divine unboundedness," minus the divine? It has shown us what lies beyond our comprehension and our control (at least, for most of us), and revealed very much our "human embeddedness within the cosmos." Földényi presumes that we are nested "within a much larger coherence," but at such a moment he reveals his own repressed Enlightenment inheritance: why coherence? To feel that we live within a much larger incoherence is still a metaphysical insight—ask Camus.

Földényi's opacity about transcendence—any kind will do, as long as it "transcends"—would appear to involve him in the same kind of dethronement of which he accuses the Enlightenment. And his rendering of the Enlightenment is a grievous caricature. In his prosecutorial zeal, he passes over what a noble and hard-won achievement such rationalism represents. Think of the dark forces of religious superstition, backed up by the terrifying power of the state, that the great anti-religionists and rationalists had to fight in order to bring to us the illumination that nowadays is so painless. It cost Diderot three fearful months in a Vincennes prison, along with grovelling promises to toe the line for the rest of his life, to be able to write these moving, rational, fiercely anti-theological but actually humble words:

> If we think a phenomenon is beyond man, we immediately say it's God's work; our vanity will accept nothing less, but couldn't we be

> a bit less vain and a bit more philosophical in what we say? If nature presents us with a problem that is difficult to unravel, let's leave it as it is and not try to undo it with the help of a being who then offers us a new problem, more insoluble than the first.

Conversely, Földényi tends to neglect just how religious many of those Enlightenment rationalists continued to be. Hegel's God wasn't just the "backdrop" to his rationalism; on the contrary, his version of history is essentially a providential theology, in which the Christian God, moving through world history in the guise of freedom, steadily reveals himself. Hegel calls it a theodicy: that is, a defense of God's ways in the world. This vision is scarcely devoid of transcendence or metaphysics.



"No, we can't go today. And, if I'm being honest, we can't go tomorrow, either."

The strange thing is that, on the evidence of the rest of his book, Földényi knows all this. When he writes about Canetti (in one of the strongest essays), or about Kleist, or about sleeping and dreaming (he uses as his text Goya's etching "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters"), he proves himself a brilliant interpreter of the dark underside of Enlightenment ambition. Ironically enough, given his disdain for Hegel's methods, Földényi is at his best when he is most dialectically supple: he shows how Enlightenment clarity, dedicated to banishing the shadows of superstition and intolerance, cast new shadows—the anxieties, doubts, tremors, and passions that would become what we choose to call Romanticism.

How and why did the Enlightenment produce such antibodies? In his essay "Kleist Dies and Dies and Dies" (he's awfully good at those titles), Földényi notes that no death was more celebrated than the double suicide of Kleist and his lover and muse Henriette Vogel, near Berlin, on November 21, 1811. It joined Young Werther's fictional suicide as the ultimate romantic gesture. But what really interests Földényi is that Kleist essentially began his career as a kind of Enlightenment optimist, with a work, written on the cusp of the nineteenth century, titled "Essay on the Sure Way to Find Happiness and to Enjoy It Even in the Greatest Tribulations" (1799). Two years later, though, Kleist went through what is called his "Kantian" crisis, in which his faith in truth was obliterated. He wrote to his sister, "The thought that we here on earth may know nothing, nothing at all of Truth . . . this thought has shattered me in the innermost sanctum of my soul." Here and elsewhere in his book, Földényi seems to suggest that an insistence on happiness (whether political or quasi-theological) encourages and produces melancholy or despair—the dark opposite that it was always trying to banish.

Whether or not you accept Földényi's account of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment dynamics as intellectual history, he is at his best when situating *himself* on the wavering and vulnerable borderline between movements. His own contradictions are oddly engrossing. In the book's magnificent final essay, Földényi calls Canetti's strange, original masterpiece "Crowds and Power" (1960), "a great pessimistic expression of the viewpoint that man is irreparable," an exploration of how "the European Enlightenment lost the potential for emancipation that lay within its reserves." Canetti, Földényi says, sees the crowd as a universal phenomenon of history, something that cannot be separated from existence itself: "The crowd is the *condition humaine.*" The crowd can be both useful and terrible. It connects us to one another, "saves one from the fear of touch, offers protection from the unknown. And yet at the same time it eliminates my own individuality." (In our current crisis, these words are charged with pathos.)

Földényi has almost returned to the intense pairing of his title essay. On one side, there is Hegel's universal freedom, a final rational good in history; on the other side, Canetti's universal crowd, at best an ambiguous, irrational potency in history. But, while the title essay is nearly fanatical, the last essay calmly explores Canetti on his own terms, and is the stronger for it. What becomes movingly clear is that Földényi also sees some version of himself in Canetti. He writes powerfully and sympathetically about Canetti's position on the periphery of Europe, his every page bursting with metaphysical power, with the question "What is man?" This was a writer unwilling to be constrained by "the rigid grid system of academic disciplines"—a writer who loved Stendhal because, as he put it, "he thought much, but his thoughts were never cold." In the midst of László Földényi's intellectual storms, there is no higher praise. ♦

POP MUSIC

MYTHBUSTERS

The 1975 and the end of rock.

BY CARRIE BATTAN

Pop music, once ruled by constraint and conformity, now faces a tyranny of freedom. Technology has eroded boundaries of taste and influence, cracking open a trove of stylistic opportunity. No mainstream act has embraced this freedom more wholeheartedly than the 1975, a group from Britain that could loosely be classified as a band, if only because its members sometimes play instruments. The group was formed, in the early two-thousands, as a teen-age punk cover band but has morphed into a genre-defying shape that poses a series of questions: Where does nostalgia end and innovation begin? What counts as rock and roll, and why should anyone care? What's the difference between ambition and self-indulgence? Is self-awareness an asset or a cross to bear?

The 1975 has four members, but its front man, a charismatic thirty-one-year-old named Matty Healy, assumes the responsibility of addressing these questions—and then he asks more. Rock music has all but disappeared from pop culture, but the mythology of the rock star looms large, and Healy embodies the archetype. Scrawny and outspoken, with a thicket of wild black hair and a love of eyeliner, illicit substances, and shirtlessness, he's become an avatar of modern authenticity, wit, and flamboyance—someone unfiltered and agile enough to spar with Maroon 5 on a public platform. The 1975 functions as a vessel for his ponderings about the psychic burdens of millennials, and the self-loathing he feels for even bothering to talk about them. (Healy has described himself, a bit sheepishly, as "a millennial that baby boomers like.")

Rock music has mostly disappeared from pop culture, but the rock star remains.

The band's first three albums showed an impressive ability to metabolize musical styles and eras, but even more dazzling was the attitudinal tap dance that Healy performed in his lyrics. He could harshly critique the preferences and habits of an entire generation while implicating himself in the same breath. "You lack substance when you say something like 'Oh what a shame,'" he sings, on "Sincerity Is Scary," from 2018. "It's just a self-referential way that stops you having to be human."

At first, the band worked mostly within the parameters of pop rock, writing big-tent anthems that drew heavily on eighties synth-pop, filled with kick drums and clever hooks—a default mode for plenty of mainstream musicians who can't rap convincingly. Gradually, the group began to take stylistic digressions, with the same sort of imaginative confidence that David Byrne and the Talking Heads had in the late seventies. The 1975 buffered its hooks with gospel choirs, funky bass lines, glitchy electronic noodling, and flushes of psychedelia. Healy, at his most existentially confused, still sounded exuberant and warm-blooded, never exhausted by the intellectual and emotional loop-de-loops he made in his lyrics. He knew how to write hooks, and how to be sentimental without being treacly. And if he did come off as treacly he could find the appropriate way to make fun of himself for it.

Each of the 1975's first three records topped the British charts, in part because the group cultivated an uncommonly sincere bond with its fans, a cross-section of whom appeared in the video for the single "TOOTIMETOOTIMETOOTIME," from 2018. The band's ostentatiously titled album "I like it when you sleep, for you are so beautiful yet so unaware of it" débuted at No. 1 in the United States in 2016, even though it wasn't made available on Spotify until two weeks later. Healy, in a quest to imbue every aspect of his work with cinematic importance, said that the band would quit making

ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICK LEGER

records when the decade ended. But after recording their ambitious “A Brief Inquiry Into Online Relationships,” in 2018, he found that there was more to say.

When the 1975 toured last fall to promote “A Brief Inquiry,” crowds often cheered for encores. In response, Healy would return to the stage alone, stand with his back to the audience, and broadcast a five-minute speech by the teen-age climate activist Greta Thunberg. “I ask you to please wake up and make the changes required possible,” she says. “To do your best is no longer good enough.” The band’s first three albums begin with an ambient instrumental track simply called “The 1975.” For its new record, “Notes on a Conditional Form,” which was released last week, the 1975 instead chose a talk by Thunberg—which was recorded specifically for this purpose but is indistinguishable from any number of her viral sermons. The speech segues neatly into a song called “People,” a screeching manifesto that nods to the band’s punk-rock origins. “Wake up, wake up, wake up!” Healy screams. “It’s Monday morning and we’ve only got a thousand of them left.” It’s a song about the frenzy of dispiriting news that Healy and his generational peers have encountered, and the way that apathy can appear as the only reasonable path forward.

But Healy is too conflicted, and too resistant to cliché, to make a pure protest album. “Notes on a Conditional Form” is not, despite its opening moments, a political record. On much of the album, he takes a more resigned stance, his voice slipping into a whisper rather than his trademark wail. And he’s more inclined to probe the sense of inertia that threatens to undermine serious political action among young people—a kind of ennui disguised as comfort, thanks to the trivial conveniences that technology offers. After many years of struggling with heroin abuse, Healy spent a stint in rehab while recording “A Brief Inquiry.” He’s since suffered a short relapse and got clean again, and on the new album he wrestles with the tedium of sobriety, describing the sensation of arriving at social gatherings only to wish he was back at home. Yet Healy is also too skeptical of his own internal monologue to make anything that could be described as a recovery album. “Now I’m clean,” he announces on “The Birthday Party,” a drowsy acoustic song with some of the conversational spoken-word touches found in many threads of modern country music. “It would seem.”

“Notes on a Conditional Form” sometimes functions as a self-referential corrective to earlier records, disputing claims that Healy has made about his life. The opening line of “Love It if We Made It,” an electro-rock hit from 2018, said that Healy was “fucking in a car, shooting heroin.” Now, on “Nothing Revealed Everything Denied,” he sings, “Life feels like a lie/I need something to be true. . . . I never fucked in a car, I was lying.” Musically, too, this album diverges from the band’s prior work. They once assimilated their influences into a cogent, ecstatic form of synth-pop, but now these individual styles appear more or less preserved as discrete entities, the band shape-shifting from song to song. And if Healy once represented a globalist version of pop music, drawing more from social media than from regional sentiment, he’s refocussed himself on his homeland, offering a survey of distinctly British subgenres: shoe-gazey Britpop, rousing punk, skittering jungle, and ragga. More than blind experimentation, this is a gesture of faith in the 1975’s fans, who are eager to follow Healy down any path he chooses to take.

Healy has so many ideas—and so many rejoinders and addenda to those ideas—that the 1975’s albums, at times, suffer from a lack of editing. (Or did they benefit from it? one can imagine Healy pondering.) All the records are lengthy and grandiloquent, but “Notes on a Conditional Form,” with twenty-two tracks, crosses a new threshold. This excess used to be a matter of lyrical verbosity and an abundance of restless energy, but Healy has a newfound reserve that occasionally veers into sluggishness. There are a number of tracks—movie-score instrumentals, electronic-dance interludes—that do not contain his voice at all. Once a bottomless well of questions, Healy sounds, faintly, as if he’d grown tired of his own contemplation. Which leads only to more contemplation: Is this the sound of growing up? What’s the difference between maturity and complacency? Is compromise a form of defeat? Is irreverence the same thing as innovation? Healy, you can be sure, has already begun drafting the answers. ♦

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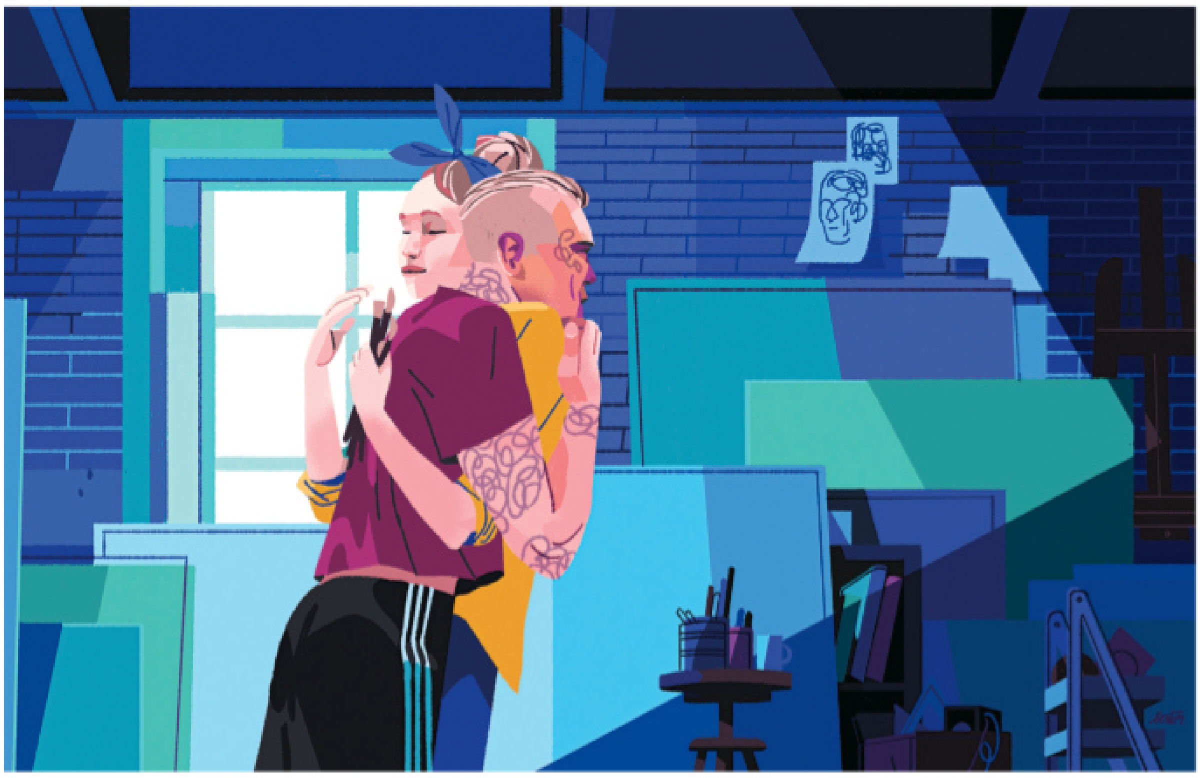
THE CURRENT CINEMA

FOLIES À DEUX

"The Painter and the Thief" and "The Trip to Greece."

BY ANTHONY LANE

An icy night in Oslo, and a junkie walks along, wheeling a small suitcase. He is on his way to get clean. Suddenly, in the middle of the street, he pauses. A hand covers the camera lens, blocking your view, and you hear a murmured transaction. What's the deal? Then it hits you: this guy is buying heroin *en route to rehab*. If you don't know whether to laugh or cry, do both.



In Benjamin Ree's documentary, a theft gives rise to an unlikely bond.

The sequence comes from a new documentary, "The Painter and the Thief," by the Norwegian director Benjamin Ree. The title has the tang of a fairy tale, and, as in the best fairy tales (or the worst accounts of drug addiction), the mood is quaveringly dark; even when things get better, you wait for them to plummet once again. Consider the man with the suitcase. His name is Karl-Bertil Nordland, usually known as Bertil—or, as he signs himself at the end of one e-mail, "The Bertilizer." He is, you might say, a picture: pale, restless, and richly illustrated. Tattoos furbish his neck and shoulders. Inked across his chest is the legend "Snitches Are a Dying Breed," which is more of a threat than a lament. Also, as he points out with a hint of pride, "I have two demons on my arm controlling things. We fight. But I let them out at times." If you say so, Bertil. To judge by this movie, the demons come and go as they please.

But something amazing happens in "The Painter and the Thief." Bertil *becomes* a picture. One day, in 2015, he and an accomplice break into a gallery in Oslo and steal two large oil paintings—removing them from their frames, rolling them up like rugs, and leaving through the back door. We see the robbers in the act, captured on CCTV, and they are soon apprehended. The works of art, however, are nowhere to be found. At the ensuing trial, the artist who created them, Barbora Kysilkova, approaches Bertil and asks politely where they might be. "I can't remember," he says, and you believe him. Unfazed, she ventures another request: "I'd love to make a portrait of you." "That's possible," Bertil replies.

Such is the unlikely beginning of the friendship, or the pact, that lies at the center of Ree's film. Having heard of the case in its early stages, he is there to chart its winding course, taking in the lows—another crazy crime of Bertil's, this time at the wheel of a car, leaves him barely able to walk and lands him back in prison—and the more surprising highs. And Ree is on hand for the most wondrous encounter of all, when Bertil visits Barbora's studio to inspect the picture of him that she has painted. At first, though it's a sizable object, he doesn't notice it. Then he does. His eyes widen, like those of a little boy who's been given a Christmas present more generous than expected. Yet the words that emerge from his lips are profanely adult, and his guttural moans could be those of a wounded animal. "Fuck me over . . . what the fuck . . . I . . . you did this from . . . no . . . whoa." He slumps and weeps.

The plight of Bertil, sadly, is far from unprecedented. His parents divorced when he was young, his mother left, and he was raised by his father. (When you see photographs of him as a kid, blond and blithe, they break your heart, as if you were looking at someone who will soon be heading off to war.) It's the old story: a deep dread of abandonment, souring slowly into the belief that, as Bertil says, "I don't deserve to be happy." Attention must finally be paid to such a person, as Willy Loman's wife would say, and the bulk of the attending, in Ree's movie, is done by Barbora. Of her own free will, she seeks out Bertil's company, scrutinizes him at length, and reproduces all that she observes. What's more, her style is hyperrealist, and the figure that emerges on the canvas is unmistakably Bertil—him and nobody else, down to every dot of his tattoos.

But wait. Salvation yarns are always tangled, and this is by no means a simple film. Ask not—or not only—what the painter does for the thief. Ask what the thief might be doing for the painter. "She sees me very well, but she forgets that I can see her, too," Bertil tells us, and what he sees is a fellow-sufferer. Barbora is Czech, and, piece by piece, we learn that she previously lived in Berlin, in an abusive relationship, and that some of her paintings bear the scars. She now has a partner, Øystein, who is almost a parody of mild Scandinavian tolerance, not chiding her for

ILLUSTRATION BY MATTEO BERTON

her fixation on Bertil (for that's what it is) but gently voicing a fear that involving herself with such a damaged soul is like letting a child play in traffic. "I played in traffic, in Prague," she replies. Not *really* the answer that Øystein was hoping for.

The list of creative artists who have grown perilously close to their models, or their elected subjects, is a long one. A burglar every bit as hapless as Bertil, George Dyer, entered the life (and the bed) of Francis Bacon, in 1963, inspired or fomented some of his most torturous paintings, and died of an overdose in 1971, shortly before a Bacon retrospective opened in Paris. We also have the unsavory saga of Jack Henry Abbott, the criminal whom Norman Mailer and other writers took under their wing and hailed for the force of his prose: in 1981, partly as a result of their lobbying, he was released from jail, only to commit murder six weeks later. Ree's movie is never so brazenly dramatic, though there's a genuine beat of excitement as Barbora, years after the initial theft, hunts for her work in a storage facility—a dungeon of creepy cages. She is now a raider of the lost art.

If "The Painter and the Thief" is occasionally annoying, it's because Ree gives away so little. He tracks to and fro in time, springing items of evidence upon us without warning, and withholding others. (Bertil's father, morose and mustachioed, pops up from nowhere.) In general, however, the film is more modest than sly, as if Ree were conceding that neither he nor we can wholly grasp, or gauge, the near-electric strangeness of the attraction between his protagonists. At one point, after Bertil injures his hand, Barbora seizes it and stares at the stigmatic wound. "This is Jesus!," she cries, and proceeds to draw it with delicacy and restraint. The two of them arrive at a happy ending, of sorts, yet I find myself worrying more about Barbora, and the shape of her future, than I do about Bertil. Other viewers will disagree, and that's why "The Painter and the Thief" is such a good lockdown movie, to be watched in the early evening and then argued about over spaghetti—or *with* spaghetti, if the discussion gets intense. The last word, though, must go to the Bertilizer. Asked why he stole the paintings from the gallery, he says, "Because they were beautiful." No arguing with that.

The boys are back at table. After "The Trip" (2010), "The Trip to Italy" (2014), and "The Trip to Spain" (2017), Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon meet again, this time for "The Trip to Greece." Not much has changed in a decade of tripping. As before, the director is Michael Winterbottom, and the two stars motor through sylvan landscapes, summoning the raw courage to eat ambrosial meals, and trading impersonations of those more famous than themselves. We get impeccable Mick Jaggers and Roger Moores, and so effortless is the switch to Richard Burton, for Brydon, that he may no longer be conscious of making it. There's nothing to eclipse the David Bowie contest, from the previous film, in which Coogan and Brydon took care to distinguish early- from late-period Bowie, swooping between the octaves; still, Coogan does unleash his inner Werner Herzog, and gives us not only Dustin Hoffman having his teeth drilled, in "Marathon Man" (1976), but also, courtesy of "Tootsie" (1982), Hoffman playing an actor playing an actress. That isn't mimicry; it's an identity heist.

Yet all is not well with our heroes, you sense, as they bandy scraps of Aristotle and tales of the Trojan War. The feast of banter, consumed amid the groves and harbors of the ancient gods, is topped with a fresh sprinkling of testiness. That's not so much a fault of the film as a deliberate move by Winterbottom, who has striven, more pointedly with each journey, to needle Coogan and Brydon with premonitions of encroaching age. Look at them lunching, at their gratified ease, on a terrace above the shore; then look at them looking at the young, who sunbathe on the rocks below and dive like naiads into the clear sea. Thus might King Priam, crestfallen, have beheld the captive Helen with a sigh.

In one respect, "The Trip to Greece" is unlike any of its predecessors. Rather than saying to yourself, "Mmm, those shrimp look good," you now think, "These guys are dining in *restaurants*—you know, those old pre-pandemic joints. With other non-family members sitting nearby!" To see Coogan and Brydon being waited upon by unmasked servers, who carry the plates with bare hands, is to yearn for the touchstones of a mythical past. As one kindly waitress inquires, in a lull between courses, "Do you want to continue?" Yes, if we can. Forever. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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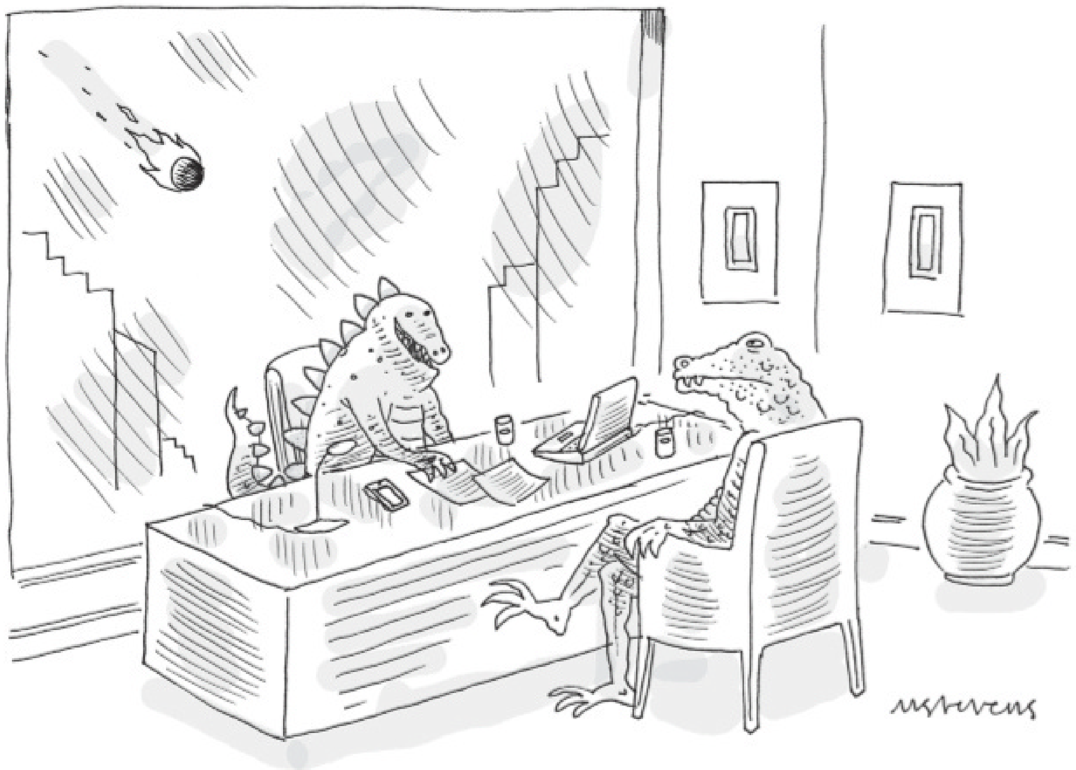
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mick Stevens, must be received by Sunday, May 31st. The finalists in the May 18th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the June 22nd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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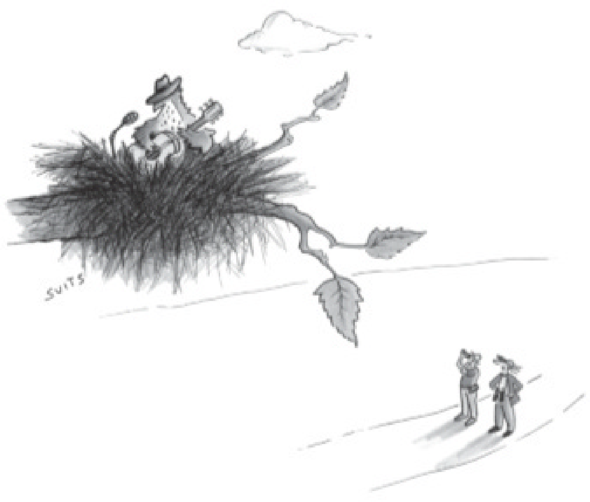
THE FINALISTS

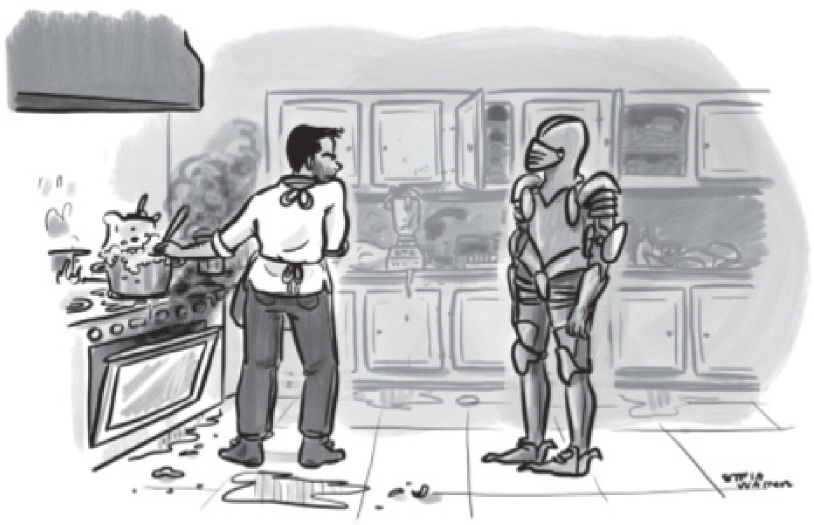


“A group of them is called a band.”
Adam Rosenblum, Chicago, Ill.

“I can usually identify a bird by the song, but I think he's doing a cover.”
Michael Holmes, Moseley, Va.

“Remember when he was just a humming bird?”
Gregg Mitchell, Stockport, England

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Fine—next time you slay the dragon and I'll cook.”
Ethan Spitalney, Boston, Mass.

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